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A HORRID GIRL

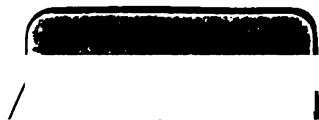


By the Author of

"MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT"⁷&c



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A HORRID GIRL.

A NOVEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT," &c.

"Some say thy fault is youth, some wantonness,
Some say thy grace is youth and gentle sport."
SHAKESPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON: RICHARD BENTLEY & SON,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

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A HORRID GIRL.

CHAPTER I.

FOUND—OR LOST?

AFTER all, Liz needed not to have been at such pains to repress my self-conceit, for circumstances will soon accomplish that task for her—if it is not already done. They will not shake my belief that I am pretty—yes, pretty, even now, when I am so much thinner and paler than I used to be. My glass still says that I am attractive; but no—that is not the

word, for alas ! it is evident that my beauty is *not* specially attractive ! Not one admirer have I got—not one ! Willie raves about Bertie. Monsieur de Montreuil, if he had eyes, would only have them for her. Captain Brancepeth left me one whole evening for her ; and even Charlie Stanton, when he calls professedly to see me, spends ten minutes with me, and an hour in the billiard-room or shooting-gallery. So, Jenny, you must abandon all hopes of hearing stories of my conquests.

I shall go back to Lawn Cottage next week, and resign myself to Selina's succession in the ranks of old maids. I hope I may do more credit to that honourable succession when it falls to me, than I am likely to do as yet. Just at present I am suffering from the ill-temper, which they say is a sign of convalescence. I indulged it this

morning at Bertha's expense to such a degree, that she has left me to my own resources and gone off, Mrs. Judson tells me, with Miss Delmar and the gentlemen to look at a litter of speckled puppies, with which Sir Locksley's Dalmatian carriage-dog has enriched the world (and the stable-bucket, as far as some of them will go), and which Bertha's election is to save or doom. I scarcely think that what I said to her should have offended her. The dialogue ran somewhat in this fashion.

"Bertie, you will be sorry to leave Forest Court this time, won't you?"

"This time?" with a look of inquiry, "and why this time more than any other, Mary?"

"You seemed to enjoy yourself so much last night. I never saw you look so happy *here* before."

"Did I?" (musingly) "possibly—I certainly spent a very pleasant evening yesterday."

"Sir Locksley did his utmost to make it so, he was particularly attentive to you. No one could help observing it."

"Because he took me into dinner?" asked Bertie, quite unmoved; "but that was because there was no one else for him to take. You drew back so decidedly when he went up to you. I suppose you wished Captain Brancepeth to take you in?"

Now I am sure that Bertie made this remark in the simplicity of her heart, and without the least intention of annoying me; but it *did* annoy me furiously. As if I had forced my companionship on Captain Brancepeth! I felt an evil desire to revenge myself on Miss Vanstone for the affront.

"I imagine it was an afterthought of Sir Locksley's; but in *your* interest, not mine. He wished to console you for your temporary separation from your almost inseparable Count."

A slight tinge rose to the girl's cheek, and she was silent.

"Positively, Bertie, you are turning out quite a coquette!"

Bertie laughed out at that; the same soft, ringing, light laugh that had attracted my attention in the drawing-room; but still she said nothing.

"Let me see, there is Willie Gillespie, the boy lover of whom you robbed *me*."

"Take him back, Mary, and welcome!"

"Do you not care for him?"

"For him!" she said, scornfully tossing her shiny curls, "a boy like that!"



"He is older than you, and he is very fond of you Bertie."

"As he was of you, Mary, a month ago; as he will be of some other girl a month hence probably."

"And now, here is the Baronet at your feet."

"No, I assure you, he was only behind my chair."

"And Captain Brancepeth bending over you with such a sentimental air."

"And a book of caricatures and comic etchings, very sentimental, was it not?"

"You certainly *did* spend a pleasant evening. I failed so notably in my endeavours to replace you with your blind friend, that I went off to bed and left him. I think you were unkind to leave him alone among strangers, Bertha; and that he may have thought you so."

Bertha had risen while I was speaking, and now stood, with her clear eyes fixed steadily on mine.

“Mary,” she said gently, “I do not know how I have vexed you, that you should try to pain me by saying what I am sure you cannot think. M. de Montreuil was not alone among strangers. You—you, who sent for him, were with him—and he never feels alone when any who love him, or whom he loves, are within hearing of his voice. You do not know M. de Montreuil—nor me !”

And—her usual habit when ruffled—my little maiden walked out of the room, and—ah, here comes the unconscious object of our discussion, to bid me adieu I suppose.

* * * *

Found ! Oh, Jenny, my mother ! she



is found, and lost! The instant M. de Montreuil came into my room I read in his face that he had something grave to tell me; but I did not imagine that it could refer to the confidence I had so lately reposed in him. The idea glanced across my mind that he had heard something about Gabrielle. A foolish idea, which a moment's reflection would have corrected, for certes, if he *had* heard anything against her, he would never have spoken of it to a girl like me.

Mrs. Judson led him in, placed a chair for him, and looked interrogatively at me. I smiled in reply, reassuringly, and signed towards the door. She courtesied and retired. He listened to hear her retreating steps, and then said.

"We are alone, Miss St. Felix?"

"Quite alone. What is it, M. de

Montreuil? You frighten me; you look so serious."

"I have news for you, of your mother."

"Already? Impossible! My letter will only reach Mr. Curling to-day."

"I have information of her," he repeated. "You would have heard it last evening, if you had remained ten minutes longer with us."

"Stop! tell me quick—is she living?"

"She is."

"And in—in——"

I could not bring out that question, I felt suffocating. My companion took my hand.

"Calm yourself, my dear child," he said, soothingly, as if he were addressing Bertha. "Your mother is alive — is well — and, I trust, happy. She is the





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wife of Cecil Folliott, now Lord Desborough."

"Ah! she is lost then—for ever lost to me!"

M. de Montreuil was silent, and made no effort to check my bitter weeping; only from time to time he stroked caressingly the hand he still held. Why I wept I cannot explain to you. I was weak in health and excited, and many mingled emotions had part in my tears.

For one thing, this sad phantom of a mother had hitherto been but a dim, confused image to me. An image, that at first pure and sacred, had hovered over a lamented grave. Then, still dim, but pure no longer, it had been suddenly called from its tomb, as it were, to flit vaguely through the world, as an existence which might yet appeal to me for help and pity—even love.

And now—oh now ! it seemed to take form and being ; as a mother who was happy, and cared not for me. A mother whose disgrace I had inherited, but in whose remembrance I had no part or lot, or who thought of me, if at all, with abhorrence—as of a living memorial of her sin. Ah ! what orphanage can be sadder than this ?

Presently I recovered myself, withdrew my hand from the Count's, wiped away my tears, and said,

“How did you learn this, M. de Montreuil ? Tell me all, circumstantially, please.”

“Circumstantially then. Shortly after you left the room, I heard Sir Locksley utter that name and title, ‘Lady Desborough,’ and you may be sure I joined his circle immediately, to hear and

to take part in the conversation. He was rallying Miss Delmar on the interest she had excited in the neighbourhood, through a mistake of the newspaper reporters who, in publishing an account of the accident that had happened at Forest Court, had given her name instead of yours. They publish bulletins of your progress every now and then, Miss St. Felix, but they always give Miss Delmar's name; and Sir Locksley it appears has not thought it worth while to correct the error."

It struck me while M. de Montreuil was speaking, that the error was rather a convenient one for Ella; for, among the speculations of the neighbours as to who could have fired the shot, none could be directed towards her while she was supposed to be the victim of it. I remembered now,

too, that since the occurrence, she had absented herself from the hunting and shooting excursions; and indeed had confined herself entirely to the house, or the grounds; but these reflections flitted rapidly across my brain, and did not divert my attention from the subject in which I was chiefly interested.

M. de Montreuil proceeded.

“The Marquis of Saltoun’s otter-hounds hunted yesterday, and Sir Locksley breakfasted at Ashfield Chase, with a number of other gentlemen——”

Here he made a dead pause.

“Well?” I cried eagerly, “go on!”

“I am afraid of startling you.”

“Oh, no fear, the fit is passed; I am perfectly calm now.”

“Lord and Lady Desborough are

spending a few days at Ashfield Chase."

"So near? That is a surprise — but you see I can bear it — go on."

The Count had taken my hand once more.

"Your pulse flutters so; are you strong enough to hear any more?"

"Quite strong, indeed, I am almost indifferent. Lady Desborough can be nothing now to Mary St. Felix."

"Sir Locksley did not see Lord Desborough, he was gone up to town on some sudden business; but he was presented, at her own request, to her Ladyship, who he declared was a most fascinating person; though he could not say much of her beauty, because she was in a riding dress, and wore her veil down all the time she was

in the room. She expressed the greatest interest in the unfortunate accident at Forest Court, asked a great many questions about the young lady ; and afterwards she began to talk about Forest Court, and the alterations Sir Locksley is going to make here ; and the conversation led at last to his inviting her to come over and see the place ; an invitation which she has accepted."

"She is coming here? But, oh ! M. le Comte, after all Lord Desborough may not be Cecil Folliott?"

"I was coming to that. When Sir Locksley ended his story, some one present inquired,

"Was not Lord Desborough's wife a divorcée? I remember hearing about it a long time ago, when he was Cecil Folliott. She may well be gracious to the

bachelors, Waldron, she is not received everywhere.'

And our host replied.

" 'She is the wife of a Cabinet Minister, Frank; so there are not many doors closed against her. What is the use of raking up a twenty years' old scandal?'"

Lady Waldron asked,

" 'Who was her first husband?' and Frank answered,

" 'I am sure I forget that—some fellow, Creole, I fancy, in Barbadoes, or San Domingo. I daresay he was a nigger, unemancipated, till she left him.'

" Then there was a laugh; and then Miss Delmar went to the harp, and sang—and that was all. I should ask your forgiveness for repeating this silly talk, Miss St. Felix,

but you commanded me to be 'circumstantial.' "

"You are quite right; thank you. And—Captain Brancepeth? Did he say nothing?"

"He was not present; he had bid Lady Waldron good-night, and left the company, almost at the same time you did."

I was glad to hear that.

I earnestly hoped that *he* might not chance to hear of Lady Desborough's visit to the Chase; above all, that he might not be in the way if she came to Forest Court.

What could it matter? you will ask. Nothing really, of course; still if he *should* be aware of her relationship to me, or whether he is or not, so long as I think he may be—it will be terrible to be in his society,

while she is being talked of before us both ; and I have to look careless, and indifferent, and gay. Ah, shall I *ever* be gay any more ?

And tears, foolish tears of self-pity, dropped fast upon the hand which the Count still clasped in his ; and he laid the other upon it, as if to protect it from the shower.

“ My dear child—” he began, when a slight movement made me raise my streaming eyes ; and lo ! there stood Captain Brancepeth.

I started so violently, and snatched my hand from the Count so abruptly, that he was instantly aware of some intrusion.

“ Who is it ?” he asked in a low voice ; and the Captain came forward at once.

"It is I, M. de Montreuil. I was not aware that Miss St. Felix was engaged, and I came to bring her the puppies the ladies have been inspecting. I beg pardon—"

"Do not go," said M. le Comte, rising; "or, at least, take me with you. My visit is at an end, and I must now make my adieux to Lady Waldron."

So saying, he shook hands with me, and taking the sailor's arm, walked away with him and the puppies; while I sat down again, and cried tears enough to have drowned the whole litter. Tears of vexation this time—for oh! what could Captain Brancepeth think of what he had witnessed?

He had disapproved of my sending for

M. de Montreuil, in the first instance; and to surprise me with him now—alone together in my private boudoir—weeping and wailing—my hand in both of his—and the caressing words, “my dear child,” on his lips!

I wonder what he thinks of my “impulses” now? Doubtless he is confirmed in his prejudice against unhappy girls like me; he believes that I am the evil fruit of an evil tree—and am ripening uncommonly fast, too! And by this time, my tears might have drowned—not the puppies only, but their mother, also.

“Miss St. Felix!” a low, deep voice murmured beside me.

I shuddered, but did not look up.

“If I were your brother—” said the voice again.



"You may thank God you are not!" cried I bitterly. "It is bad enough as it is; but if there were two of us——!"

"You would not need M. de Montreuil as a third," said Captain Brancepeth; and there was a smile in his voice which emboldened me to look up to the smile in his eyes.

"Come," he added, taking the chair the Count had abdicated, "your friend has but half fulfilled his task of consoler. Give me your confidence, and let me try to complete it."

"No—no—go away."

"You are not well," he said, tenderly. "You over-exert yourself, and you should have some one more experienced than Miss Vanston to take care of you. Let me ride

over to Lawn Cottage, and fetch Miss Shelden."

"I am all right now," I answered. "I am weak, and I cry about nothing."

"Can I not help you? Surely I may do as much for you, as M. de Montreuil can?"

"You can neither of you do anything for me."

"And you will not tell me what grieves you?"

"No—no. Go away, please."

He rose as if to obey; then stood looking at me irresolutely.

Then began,

"Let me say just one word——Ah, here is Miss Vanston. I leave you with her. She is very nervous, Miss Vanston; take care of her. Her *tête-à-tête* with

your blind friend has quite unstrung
her."

I wonder how Bertie liked that!

CHAPTER II.

LADY BRANCEPETH TO HER SON.

“Reason, my son
Should choose himself a wife, but as great reason
The father (all whose joy is nothing else
But fair prosperity) should have some counsel
In such a business.”

A WINTER'S TALE.

“**H**ERE,” said Ethel is a letter in a different handwriting ; am I to read this, Aunt Mary ?”

“Certainly, my dear ; that letter was not among those addressed to Jenny, and was never in her possession at all. I slipped it

into the collection myself, yesterday, because I thought it would throw some light on Captain Brancepeth's conduct, which to 'fast' young ladies like Maudie, may have seemed very—very——”

“Dilatory,” suggested Maudie, with a laugh.

“Dilatory, if you like,” resumed her ladyship, “but, girls, don't ask me how that letter came into my hands—perhaps,” (with an arch twinkle in her pretty old eyes) “perhaps, you know — I *stole* it!”

Lady Brancepeth to her son.

“Do not be vexed with me, dearest Vivian, if I say that your letter, received this morning, does not give me the unmixed pleasure which the writer appeared to think it would. Do not imagine that my sym-

pathy is cold, or that I am in any way influenced by the ambitious or mercenary considerations which I from the first have disclaimed in connection with this subject ; but what you tell me does not entirely relieve the anxiety I have felt about it, ever since you declined to leave Forest Court, and join your father and me here. Let me speak out all that is in my heart, frankly and fully ; and, if you wish it, I will be silent for ever henceforth. And first, let me once more assure you, that both Sir Rupert and I have such entire confidence in you, that you would never introduce to the familiar intimacy of your mother and sisters, any girl who was unused to, or disqualified for, the society of gentlewomen, that we are prepared to welcome, without reserve or hesitation, whoever you may present to

us as the wife of your choice; and I know that to you the conviction that this is so, will give more weight to the remonstrance I am yet free to offer, than any fear of future alienation or disapproval. Methinks I can hear you say,

“How this dear little lady jumps to conclusions! when did I ever tell her that I had certainly met ‘the wife of my choice?’

“My dear boy, if you had told me so, it would be too late to ask you, as I now do, to pause—only to pause—before you ‘throw the reins of self-control on the neck of inclination,’ for I am well assured that no runaway horse ever galloped off more recklessly with a helpless rider than your passionate nature will hurry you away, if you once relax the firm self-



restraint that has been the habit and the discipline of your life.

“My Vivian, a mother’s eyes would be less keen-sighted than they are, if I had not long seen that you are more deeply fascinated by this Mary St. Felix than you have ever yet been by any woman you have met; and believing as you did that a family disgrace placed a barrier between you, which both your father and I considered to be insurmountable, the fascination must have been very powerful to induce you to linger within its spell, in society so uncongenial to your tastes and habits as is that of Forest Court.

“Well, that barrier exists no more; or rather, you discover that it never existed; and yet, though I do not deny that there is a charm in this girl as you describe her, though I am content to accept her youth, her beauty, her innocent vivacity, which so enchant you,

as a sufficient equivalent for the higher worldly rank, or larger fortune, which you might be entitled to look for in a bride. "Still, I entreat you to pause, to remove yourself for a space beyond the sphere of her influence, and there to reflect seriously (I know it has more than once glanced across your mind), whether a snake does not lie hid among your flowers, that may yet defile and poison all your joy in them? In a word, is Mary's nature free from the taint of duplicity, of deceit, which has ruined to the very core, the fruit of so much happiness in many a home? That women are by moral constitution more deceitful than men, I cannot allow, a woman well and carefully brought up, whatever be her natural weakness, will be as brave, as truthful, as the most loyal hearted man; but how seldom does

her education tend to develope such virtues.

“Inaccurate from want of severe mental training, or from excessive and ill-regulated imagination, or from timidity or over sensitiveness to censure and praise, the deviation from truth, which in a man would be condemned as dishonourable, or despised as cowardly, is forgiven to *her*, as an infirmity that claims indulgence, even if not fostered as the mere playfulness of wit and sarcasm ; till concealment and evasion become habitual to her, and the transition to direct falsehood is easy ; till she grows a feeble, unworthy, if not guilty thing, and no husband’s heart can safely trust in her. My son, from various little incidents that you have sketched for me, in your picture of life at Forest Court a picture in which, (unconsciously to yourself perhaps) one figure is always in the foreground—I have derived

the impression which causes me so grave an anxiety.

“I gather from your narrative that Miss St. Felix has been but imperfectly educated in—possibly—a second-rate provincial school. In such schools girls are not seldom exposed to temptations to little meannesses and artifices which tend to weaken their moral principles, especially when as in this young lady’s case, they have not the wholesome corrective of home-life to fall back upon, or the high standard which is held up to them by the refinement of delicacy and good breeding.

“Forgive me for saying that your pretty favourite has been guilty, by your own account, of one or two actions that are irreconcilable with *my* idea of a perfectly well-bred gentlewoman; but in a girl of

eighteen, faults of manner would be of little importance, if they gave no indication of graver blemishes.

“Am I unkind in alluding to them at a time when she is ill and suffering. Oh! how readily would my heart respond to the appeal you make to it for sympathy for this poor orphan child. But my son—my son—the happiness of your whole future is at stake, and it is my judgment, not my heart, that must answer you.

“The account you sent me of the mysterious occurrence at Forest Court shocked me deeply. Lady Waldron’s government of her household must be very lax and injudicious, for such a thing to have happened at all. That a young lady should run about a house where she is visiting, in the dead of night, dressed up as a ghost

—in company with a youth, too!—may be pardoned as a childish frolic; but I confess I am perplexed and displeased at her strange persistence in declining to say who wounded her. What good reason can she have for such a reserve? A reserve, too, which is entirely at variance with the frank, impulsive character which you say she possesses. Either you are wholly mistaken in her character, or, it is an assumed one, or she has some very serious motive for screening the author of her accident—for, of course, it could only be an accident—and all her ingenuous candour and innocence are not incompatible with a secretiveness, possibly even a duplicity—which should be a fatal blot in your eyes.

“Generous and trustful as you are, Vivian, you are not one who would be weakly

blind in your confidence, even in the woman you wholly loved. You would never be suspicious of deceit or falsehood ; but you would very soon detect it, and once having detected it, you would love no more. To affection would succeed, not aversion, not bitterness, but a cold, contemptuous—even although *compassionate*—indifference, which would be the death-knell of your domestic joys for ever. And once more, knowing this, I implore you to be very, very sure, that the wife you choose is one who—whatever be her faults and shortcomings, will never live contentedly in even the shadow of a lie.

“Alas ! my warning may be too late ; but I know I can rely on the promise you made me when we parted. A promise playfully exacted, but which will not be the

less faithfully kept—that you would not give any girl a right over you until your jealous mother had again embraced you as, even for the last time, *all her own* ! And so I secure for you a little breathing space in which to reflect on what I have said. But why will you yet hover like a moth round the flame, within a sphere of witchery in which, every hour, the voice of wisdom may be silenced by that of passion ? I have prayed you, for the girl's sake, to be more guarded ; and your reply, my foolhardy one, is here before me,

“ ‘ Little mother, do not fear. Your sailor lad has no such perilous fascinations as your partiality gifts him with ! Miss St. Felix is frank and kind to me, but does not give the faintest sign of a special preference for me—over young Gillespie, or

her French friend; and I am not such a coxcomb as to misinterpret the causeless blushes that come and go, on a sensitive young girl's cheek.'

"Well—be it so; still, you have been long enough at Forest Court, where, you may be assured, that neither I nor your sisters, will ever seek you. We leave for Paris in a few days after this letter reaches you, and your father hopes that you will meet us at Dover, and we will all return home together. Then, my dearest, it shall be as you wish, whether we will talk further over the subject which has so deep an interest for us all; or, whether I am silent on it, henceforth and always."

"And that," cried Maudie, as Ethel stopped reading, "that letter is from Cap-

tain Brancepeth's mamma, is it Auntie? What a nasty, cross old thing she must have been!"

"She was not old, in the first place," answered Lady Mary, reprovingly. "And she was the sweetest, the most elegant woman I ever knew. From the first moment I met her, to the last, when I stood beside her death-bed, I never lacked a Mother."

CHAPTER III.

ELLA'S STORY.

"Poor wretch

That for thy mother's fault art thus exposed

To loss, and what may follow."

A WINTER'S TALE.

"CIRCUMSTANTIAL," I told M. de Montreuil to be; and "circumstantial" I promised Jenny to be. I don't think she has had much right to complain of me in that respect, so far; and I mean to persevere, as well as I can, in my direct "circumstantial" narra-



tive. There is, as you will perceive, a break in it of a few days. I resume it where I left off.

I am not yet strong. The close confinement in which the doctor keeps me, I think prevents my gaining strength, though my wound is nearly quite healed, and I do not suffer any pain. Being weak in health makes me weak in nerves, and anything that excites, or distresses me, throws me back from my progress to recovery. The prospect of my mother's visit to Forest Court agitated me the more because there was no one to whom I could speak on the subject. I wondered if she knew that I was a guest here? If her wish to see the place was merely an excuse to come where her daughter was, in the hope of meeting her? And should we meet—and how?



That question, at least, was not long unsettled.

One morning Gabrielle came into my sitting-room, shortly after breakfast, and addressing Bertie, who was with me, she said,

“Bertha, Lady Waldron has ordered the carriage to drive to town to do some shopping; and she says she would be so glad if you would go with her.”

“To town?” repeated Bertie, “but we shall not be home until dinner-time!”

“Well, you have no other engagement, have you? It is a lovely day, and it is quite light now at five.”

“But I cannot leave Mary alone.”

"I will stay with Mary, and take great care of her, if she will trust me. Will you, Mary?"

If she had used any other word than "trust," I think I should have found some excuse for declining her company; but I did not like to appear distrustful of her. Still—illness I suppose makes one sensitive to slight impressions—I thought there was a restlessness in her manner that boded evil of some kind; and I inquired,

"Where are all the men?"

She answered,

"Captain Brancepeth has walked over to Ashfield to see the Stantons. Sir Locksley and the other gentlemen have gone to Hartingford on some electioneering business. So, Mary, we shall have the whole house



to ourselves. Will you have me to amuse you?"

Of course I could but assent, little dreaming of the kind of "amusement" she had provided for me; and in less than an hour afterwards, Lady Waldron and Bertha had driven off on their journey to town, leaving Ella and me alone together. Not, however, until our hostess had come in to kiss me, and bid Gabrielle take great care of me, and desire me to take good care of little Moustache, while she confirmed Ella's statement (to my great satisfaction) that Sir Locksley and his party of "specials" were gone off, and would not be back until late at night.

"And now they are all off," said Ella, as the sound of the wheels died away in the distance, "what do you say, Mary, to

a little change of scene? You must be so tired of these rooms! Come down with me to the drawing-room. There is a good fire—you cannot take cold; it is warm as May outside; and no one being at home we shall have no intruders of either sex.”

To this proposal I gladly acceded, and we went down together from my apartments to the blue drawing-room, which was a smaller room than the principal drawing-room, opening out of it, and used by Lady Waldron as a kind of boudoir when there were few or no guests at Forest Court. It was lighted by a very large window, deeply embayed, that looked out upon the gardens over a low terrace; the wide, old-fashioned seat was cushioned luxuriously, and might have held two or three persons with ease;

and the heavy curtains that fell over it would have kept them in complete seclusion if they had wished it.

At present, however, the recess was untenanted, the windows were flung wide, and the curtains looped back to admit the soft air which stole into the room, laden with the breath of daphnes, and violets, that grew beneath it; and thrilling with the music of the thrushes and blackbirds exulting in the coming of spring. Who could think of taking cold from such air as that?

I seated myself on the cushions, and leaned eagerly from the window to enjoy myself with the birds and blossoms; while Gabrielle wrapped a shawl round me, placed a footstool for my feet, and dropped the

heavy curtains on each side of me to keep—said she—the draught from me. I received her attentions almost without noticing them, so absorbed was I in the beauty without on which I gazed; and even when she spoke I did not remove my eyes to her face.

“Mary, we are friends, are we not?”

“We are not foes, I hope, Ella. Oh! I declare I see a yellow butterfly!”

“There is a long interval between ‘friends,’ and ‘not foes.’ Still, I suppose I must be satisfied with your mere tolerance.”

“I did not mean—ah! that sparrow is hunting my butterfly—the first of the season. Oh, the little wretch, look, Ella.”

"There is no time—we have not many minutes left us. Mary! will you do me a service—I have deserved none at your hands. Still, will you be generous, and do me a kindness, which only you can do for me?"

I forgot the butterfly then, and the birds, and flowers and all, and turned to her in speechless terror.

"Do not look so frightened, child. I am not going to ask you to do anything wrong. I only want you to be a witness for me in a matter which concerns me deeply."

I could only question her with my eyes. A witness? and to what?

She continued after a momentary hesitation,

"I am expecting a visitor presently, Mary."

“And you promised that we should be alone. Oh, Gabrielle!”

“Pshaw!” she cried, impatiently. “Do not get so excited about nothing. I know what you suspect. But it is a lady whose arrival I am waiting for——”

“Oh!” I said considerably relieved, “I don’t so much mind a lady; still, if you please, Ella, I would rather go back to my own room.”

“Not yet,” she replied, putting me again into the seat from which I had risen. “I tell you, you can do me a great service at no cost at all to yourself. I wish to have a witness to the interview between the lady and me; it is essential to me that I should have a witness to a statement that she is likely to make, and which she will not make if she does not believe that she is alone with me——”



“Then,” I cried, once more rising, “you must find a witness where you can, for I will certainly not help you. I do not know how it is that I am mixed up with such unpleasant dealings here in Forest Court—even my play and jest has turned into deceit and slyness! I would give worlds to forget the secrets I have already surprised and stolen since I have been in this place. I will have no fresh ones, thank you. Let me go, Ella, I *will* go!”

“But, Mary,” she persisted, “the conversation I wish you to overhear is on subjects on which you have a right to gain information in any way you can——”

“Not in this way! I feel, as it is, like a crawling serpent, for having overheard—what I *have* overheard—here and there.

I will cast my serpent's slough, and stand erect. I will hear nothing that is not meant for me to hear. Let me pass, Ella, or—" (for she still barred my exit)—"I will stop if you insist on it, but your friend, when she comes, shall both see and hear me."

And so saying, I sullenly resumed my seat, leaning over the window-sill on my folded arms, and gazing into the garden as before; into the garden, which had suddenly lost for me all its glow and fragrance.

"One moment, Mary," said Ella.

She quitted my side; hastily glided into the large drawing-room, and looked out from one of the windows, which commanded the avenue all the way to the



lodge-gate in the far distance; then she came back to me.

"There is time," she muttered. "Mary, I have a story to tell you—will you listen to it?"

I was too angry to answer her.

She continued pleadingly,

"You think very ill of me, and I have never appealed against your harshest judgment. Will you refuse to hear what I have to tell you, when I say that it contains some palliation of faults which you possibly *now* think inexcusable?"

"I do not wish to hear any more secrets."

"You need not keep it a secret. You may remember, or repeat, or forget it, as you will, when you have heard it; but will you listen?"

I wonder, had curiosity any share in the consent which I, though still reluctantly, gave at last to this strange girl's entreaty ; and she kneeled down on the foot-stool at my feet, supporting herself on the cushions of the window seat, while she fixed her large dark eyes steadily on my half-averted face, and began her story thus.

“Six and twenty years ago, an old man—he was old then—lived in a manufacturing town in the north of Ireland. He was a banker ; but he was also a political agent and money-lender ; and so, without any high social position, or personal character, possessed considerable influence, and, for an Irishman, considerable wealth. He had married late, and lost his wife early. She had left him two children—a son—born

shortly after their marriage—and a daughter six years younger.

“At the time I speak of she was sixteen, and, I believe, very beautiful; the pride of her father’s heart, who loved little else but his money; but whose great ambition was that his children should form alliances with higher families than their own. Hush! I thought I heard wheels — no — it is nothing! Well, the girl was carefully educated at a fashionable school in Dublin, and she was on the point of leaving it to preside over her father’s home, when she attracted the notice of a young man who was visiting in the town, and who contrived, in some way, to establish a clandestine communication with her.

“He, too, was very young, but he was the only son of an English baron, and was

already betrothed to his cousin, and on the point of marriage with her. But the lady, though titled and wealthy, was sickly, deformed, and much older than himself. The Irish girl of sixteen was as fascinating as her rival was unattractive. Her home had as little charm for her, as his plighted bride had for him; and they fled together to the borders of Scotland, where they were married by the irregular, but still legal, rites of Gretna Green."

Here she paused, and then, still looking fixedly in my face,

"Those were my parents, Mary."

"Yours, Ella!" I cried in astonishment, "but I understood——"

"Never mind what you understood, listen to the end of my story. Immediately after the marriage, the pair returned to

England, to throw themselves at the father's feet, and ask for forgiveness, after the prescribed ordinance in such affairs. But they were met half-way by the father, who had pursued them with very different views. The youth—he wanted some weeks of coming of age—was forcibly taken back to London, under strict supervision ; and the girl was shipped off to Belfast, in charge of a confidential agent of the old Lord's, who had received his directions, and carried them out with cruel success.

“The banker was assured that the young couple had been surprised, and separated—in London—not in Scotland, where they had never gone, or intended to go ; and that the father's interference had been chiefly in the interest of the lady to



whom his son was on the point of marriage, and to save him from a dishonourable connection ; while, on the other hand, the poor girl was persuaded to silence by the assurance that when her lover came of age, he would be able to claim her, and assert the validity of their marriage, which could, and would be cancelled by his father if known in the interval. She was too young and ignorant not to be easily duped."

"But the husband?" I asked, when Ella stopped, and listened again for her expected friend.

"I cannot tell you," she answered, "what arguments were used to him ; assuredly no appeal was spared, either to his fears of paternal authority, to his interest, or perhaps even to his *honour*, as

first pledged to his cousin. The result, at any rate was, that a few weeks after the elopement, his wedding with that lady was celebrated with all customary pomp and publicity; thus at once putting an end to any projects the banker might have formed, for obtaining justice for his daughter when her lover should come of age.

“Probably, however, he had no such projects; he appears to have accepted without much question, the statements made by the person with whom the old Lord had sent him back his child; and the more readily, from the silence she herself maintained. Deeply did he feel the disgrace, and bitterly did he resent it. The unhappy girl was sent to a distant relative in Jersey, where she was kept in close con-

finement, and strictly watched, until I came into the world."

"I thought you were born in Bretagne?" I said innocently.

"Well," she answered carelessly, "Jersey is not far from Bretagne—do not interrupt me so——"

"But if you told me an untruth then, you may be telling me another now, which am I to believe?"

"I am telling you simple truth, as you will soon have an opportunity of knowing. What does it matter, whether I was born in Jersey or Bretagne? Directly after my birth, I was placed at nurse in a French family, and my mother, for appearance sake, I suppose, was recalled to her father's house. He made

her as thoroughly miserable as her conduct had made him, and after a short period of common wretchedness, he sent her away to a friend and correspondent of his—a wealthy merchant in one of the West Indian settlements, where she committed the fatal error of a life full of error—fatal for her—still more so for me. She married!”

“But,” I said, “if she believed that her first marriage was legal, it was more than an error, it was a crime?”

“Possibly her faith on that point had been shaken by her lover’s marriage, of which, you may be sure, her father had taken care to inform her. At any rate, she was punished. She had not long been married, when delicate health compelled her

to seek a change of climate, and her husband sent her to Madeira. There she again met my father, who had accompanied his dying wife there. She had died just before my mother's arrival. Mutual explanations were followed by reconciliation—and I suppose they fell into the old habit of elopement. A divorce came next of my mother from her last husband, and they were re-married, hard and fast this time."

And Ella laughed a scornful, bitter laugh, that did not express much filial reverence, or love.

"Oh, Ella!" I cried, "how strange that you should be the daughter of a divorcée, like——"

And I checked myself abruptly. I was not at all inclined to reciprocate.



cate my companion's family confidence.

"Like many others, you may say," she rejoined, "but I am coming now to a part of my history which is not at all like that of many others, and which is to explain to you my wish that you should be an unsuspected witness of the interview which is about to take place between me, and my mother——"

"Your mother?" I cried, springing to my feet in a passion of astonishment. But before she could reply, the footman threw the door of the outer drawing-room wide, and announced

"Lady Desborough."

CHAPTER IV.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

“God’s mercy, maiden! does it curd your blood
To say—I am your mother?”

ALL’S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

IN my utter bewilderment, I thought no more of the purpose for which Gabrielle had brought me to that retreat. Quick as light it flashed across me that the story she had just been telling me, and which Lady Desborough’s arrival had interrupted, was that of *my* mother, as well as hers. She was then, my sister. I

had found a sister and a mother. Decidedly I had become rich in relatives. But whether my wealth would increase my happiness was more than doubtful. Involuntarily I shrank back behind the curtains that screened me, as Ella passed slowly from beneath them, and awaited Lady Desborough's approach; while trembling all over, I eagerly gazed on her, as I cowered out of her sight in my recess. But she never glanced towards the window. She evidently saw only her child, and Ella had placed herself in such a position, that her mother was partly turned away from where I lay hid, though I had a full view of her face and figure in a large pier glass opposite. She was taller than Ella, whom she singularly resembled, except that her countenance had a softer expression. She

had too, more of distinction in her air and manner, with an equal grace of form. She was elegantly, but very simply dressed, and the dignified charm of a beauty that had but just begun to wane, was not lost by any frivolous pretension to a long vanished youth.

Yes, I well remembered as I looked at her, the features of the portrait that my grandfather had attempted to destroy, and which Ella had trampled on. But why had she called the original her greatest enemy? Lady Desborough had paused a moment or two in the outer drawing-room, either to summon up self-possession, or in the expectation that Ella would join her there. She now came in, and flinging back her veil, advanced hurriedly towards her daughter, with both hands eagerly

extended, as she murmured in a voice faint with emotion.

“My Gabrielle! at last—at last!”

But Ella, who had stood perfectly unmoved, as her visitor approached her, now drew back with a profound curtsy, and silently waved her to a seat facing her, and close to the window in which I was. Almost mechanically as it seemed, the lady obeyed the gesture, merely casting on the girl one look of sad reproach, and a silence followed which was broken by Ella in her coldest tone.

“Your ladyship has received my letter, I presume, though you have not condescended to reply to it?”

“I am here to answer it in person, for Lord Desborough and myself, Gabrielle,” answered the mother gently, “but oh, my

child! my child! I did not look for such a reception. It is a sad, a very sad realisation of the hope I have cherished day and night since I was robbed of you long years ago."

"We had better put aside all considerations of mere sentiment, madam," answered Ella, still coldly, "they come with a bad grace from one who has abandoned and disgraced the child she professes to love. You will never, I trust, have reason to accuse me of want of respect towards my father, or you; but before you can lay claim to my filial affection, you must give me the proof I have asked you for—of parental love—nay, of justice."

Lady Desborough shook her head mournfully.

"It cannot be, Gabrielle; nothing you have said, or can say, will have the least effect upon Lord Desborough. It can never be."

"Let us clearly understand each other," said Ella; and she spoke slowly and distinctly, with the evident design of fixing my attention on her words. "Lord Desborough, I think, does not seek to dispute the fact that I am his daughter?"

A deep flush rose to the mother's brow, but she made no answer.

"That is, he has tacitly acknowledged it in a correspondence which he held with my grandfather, shortly after your *second* marriage with him, and which correspondence is now in my hands, as I wrote to you. But he persists in

his refusal to acknowledge the irregular, but *legal* union, to which I owe my birth."

Lady Desborough only repeated her former gesture, and the same melancholy words,

"It can never be, Gabrielle !"

"I can understand," continued Ella, "that my father's tenderness for a daughter whom he has never seen, cannot weigh in the balance with the usurped rights of a son of whom he is proud—especially as justice to me would involve the rather awkward confession of a wrong both to that son's mother and to you. But I cannot see why you should make yourself a party to the injury done to your own child, for the sake of the child of the woman who supplanted you."

“Blame me, Gabrielle, as you will,” said Lady Desborough, earnestly, “but do not accuse your father. He had been assured, and believed, that I was drowned in the vessel that was lost on its way to Belfast; the person who escorted me, pretended to have sailed with me in that ship, and to have nearly perished himself in the vain effort to rescue me in the shipwreck of which he was one of the few survivors—although, in fact, we had sailed some days earlier. The wrong he did me in marrying his cousin was at least an unconscious one.”

“Still,” rejoined Ella, with an emphasis which I fancied was meant for me; “you admit that it was a wrong? Why then should you condone it by consenting to uphold Mr. Folliott’s interests against mine?”

"Alas! Gabrielle, did I not condone it, as you say, by my rash and sinful union with another? on whom I revenged tenfold, the wrong done me, of which *he* was guiltless."

"In truth," said Ella, insolently, "the general confusion seems to have been caused entirely by *over-marriage*. If my father had not married Lady Anne Townsend in such a hurry, and if you had not married Captain St. Felix, perhaps things would have righted themselves in time. But as *I* was no party to these mistakes, so I will not be a sufferer by them. Once more, Lady Desborough, and for the last time, I demand, from my father and you, the acknowledgment of that secret marriage, and the recognition of me—the daughter born of it—or I will take



immediate measures to force it from you."

"You could not be so cruel, Gabrielle!" cried the unhappy mother, turning imploring eyes on the girl's white, inexorable face. "Think of the dishonour and ruin you would bring on Folliott, your own half-brother, who has never harmed you; of the scandal of such a revelation—a scandal which Lord Desborough, proud as he is, and sensitive to public opinion, would never survive. But no—you cannot, if you would, do this; neither your father nor myself will ever make an admission that would ruin the son whom he adores; and the proofs of that Scotch marriage have long been destroyed."

"I can but try," answered Ella;



“possibly his Lordship may prefer *you* to his son—if he prefers *him* to me; and may hesitate before he loads you with more reproach than you have already incurred for him; for at least it will be easy for me to prove that I am *your* daughter.”

My whole heart rose against her, as she uttered this taunt. I rose to my feet with a shudder, and would have sprang to the side of the unhappy woman whose wrong to *me* had been as great as to her, whose claims on my pity and forbearance were the same; but there was no place for me at that mother's side. She had not remembered me—she had no thought for me—all her yearnings were for the girl who despised and insulted her. Even now, she answered sorrowfully, but without bitterness.

“What gain do you propose for yourself, Gabrielle, from an exposure for which every one with a grain of right feeling would severely condemn you? You would gain no wealth; all the money in the Folliott family goes with the title to the male heir; and the fortune my brother left you must be amply sufficient for your requirements. Your father would detest you for his son’s sake. Your half-brother would certainly not love you, and the sympathies of all his relatives would be with him.

“Believe me, you would be no gainer; you would not even have the excuse of wishing to restore your mother’s fame. Alas! you would but drag it afresh through the mire of old scandals, sleeping now in the graves of those who most suffered by them.”



"You ask what should I gain?" said Ella. "I should gain my rightful rank, as the Honourable Gabrielle Folliott, the daughter of an English peer, not the illegitimate offspring of a wretched Irish usurer!"

Strangely enough, this uncivil allusion to her relatives seemed to sting Lady Desborough more than the taunts that had been aimed at herself. She answered with more bitterness than she had as yet displayed.

"The blood of the usurer in your veins, Gabrielle, will still be remembered against you; and it will be said by those you will have ruined, that your selfishness may be traced to that."

Ella saw that she had made a



false move, and she hastened to repair it.

“Mother,” she murmured, with a sudden softness in her look and voice, which altered her so entirely, that her mother gazed at her in surprise. “Mother, let them say what they will—since thus—and thus only—I can win the hand of the man I love.”

Lady Desborough gave a moan, that was almost a cry.

“Is it so? Ah, my poor child! then, God help us all!”

God help us all, indeed! I repeated inwardly, if love is what these unhappy women believe it to be. A selfish, ungovernable passion, to which may be sacrificed all noble self-control, self-respect and purity. All the righteous claims or

others — all their happiness — all their trust ; all truth, honour, and innocence.

But my own heart gave the lie to this grovelling semblance of a holy impulse. Surely, love that is *truly* love, must elevate and not degrade ; may consecrate the life it may not gladden ? And I prayed that it might be so with me ; and even amid the stormy whirl of the tempest of passion I was sorrowfully witnessing, my soul was calmed and strengthened, as I lifted up my *own* love to Heaven in prayer.

CHAPTER V.

IT CANNOT BE.

“**Y**OU yield then, mother?” and Ella went up to Lady Desborough, and bent caressingly over her. “If you will acknowledge me, all the rest will follow—my father cannot withstand us both.”

“Tell me who it is you love, Gabrielle?”

And the girl bent lower, and whispered—
I well knew what name!

The effect of the avowal must have been

different from what she suspected, for there was positive disgust in Lady Desborough's expression, as she heard it.

"*That* man? Gabrielle! You would ruin your brother—alienate Lord Desborough, and disgrace me for a man like that?"

"If you know anything against him," replied Ella, with more than her former frigid haughtiness, "you are possessed of information which is shared by no one else."

Lady Desborough said,

"It is precisely because there is so little positively known against him—and so little thought of him—that he is one of the last men I could have suspected you of loving. He has all the mean vices which lower a gentleman in the opinion of his equals—

while he is careful to avoid the excess which would sink him below their companionship.

“Believe me, Gabrielle, I have taken pains to learn something of the character of a man whose guest I find you. He is suspected of being a coward; he is known to be a bully. He gamed and drank, during his brother’s lifetime, who was more profligate than himself; but since he succeeded to the title, he has done his utmost to conceal those vices, with a hope—it is said—of repairing his fortunes by a wealthy marriage. He has sufficient breeding to hide a native coarseness; sufficient cunning to veil a low intellect. There is nothing in him but his personal beauty to attract any girl’s love!”

“It is evident,” remarked Ella, “that we

are not likely to agree in our estimate of Sir Locksley's character, so we will not discuss it further. You are certainly mistaken in supposing that he wishes to marry for money, or that he needs to do so. But he insists on family connection with his wife, and the stain on my birth is all that prevents him from making me the mistress of Forest Court."

"And the most unhappy wife on earth," rejoined Lady Desborough. "If this is so Gabrielle, my child, you have given me at least one great consolation for the pain of disappointing you."

"Do you mean that you still refuse to own your Scotch marriage?"

The mother silently made a gesture of affirmation, and Ella turned away.

"Then our conference is ended. Your

Ladyship has been warned, and it only remains for me to act."

Lady Desborough rose, in an absent kind of way, and looked thoughtfully at the speaker.

"What do you intend to do, Gabrielle?"

"I intend," she answered resolutely, "to send to the public prints, a statement of my claims. Lord Desborough may charge me with libel; but the subject will at least be openly investigated."

(And this, thought I, is my sister!)

The pensive look had disappeared from Lady Desborough's face, but her dark eyes were intensely sad, as she fixed them on the menacing ones of her child.

"I can, at least, save your father *that* disgrace, Ella — even by taking one more

on myself. My child! I have deceived you! The whole story of that marriage was a fabrication of my own. We never reached Scotland."

"I shall ascertain that by and by," said Ella, coolly.

"You doubt me? Reflect one moment. Had you not been eager to credit that story, the improbabilities and inconsistencies in it would sooner have occurred to you. Would my father have accepted, without question, the assertion of a stranger that I had never reached Gretna? Or would any one have persuaded me to conceal my marriage, and to persist in that concealment, against your interests as well as my own? Would my husband have been deceived by a fictitious shipwreck? or have married only six weeks later — without first obtaining

a proof that he was free to do so? Gabrielle ! Gabrielle ! where was your natural sagacity, when you were so easily duped by a romance, hastily invented to excuse myself a little in your eyes ?”

(“ And this,” said I, “ is my mother !”)

While she had been speaking Ella’s colour had varied rapidly, from the deepest crimson to the deadliest white. She looked positively ghastly, as she asked,

“ Will you *swear*, that you lied to me ?”

“ I will—most solemnly.”

“ And your motive ?”

“ Ah, Gabrielle !—is it so hard to guess ? The contempt of one’s child is bitter ; and I loved you so !”

“ And I,” said Ella, between her clenched teeth, “ I *hate* you ; I *despise* you — as such women as you *are* despised !”

(Oh ! how dared *she* say that !)

The mother answered only,—

“ You are very young, Gabrielle, to be so cruel.”

“ Young ?” she repeated, with a burst of unrestrained passion. “ I was never young, youth was no part of the heritage of wretchedness I derived from you ! For the caressing indulgence that is the sunshine of life’s spring time *I* received only calm indifference or aversion. Nothing that wealth could purchase was denied me ; but it was given without affection, received without gratitude. Every advantage of education was bestowed ungrudgingly it is true, but always with the bitter lesson enforced with it, that I might become something less of a disgrace, but could never be an honour to the kinsmen

who tolerated and hated me! So long as those kinsmen lived my life was odious to me. When their death left me free, it left me also with a hope—which you have nourished by your falsehood, and now ruthlessly trample in the dust, trampling all my heart with it. Liar and adulteress, I *hate* and *despise* you!”

My time had surely come at last? The miserable mother had crouched beneath the tempest that broke over her, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece; one hand hid her face, the other hung listlessly by her side. I stole softly from my place of concealment, and going up to her, I took the drooping hand in mine, whispering soothing,

“Poor mother!”

She started at the touch, looked at me



in a wild way, and then turned upon Ella, roused at last to angry remonstrance.

"Who is this, Gabrielle? You have posted a spy on me it seems. Shame, shame on you! that even *you* could be guilty of a treachery so base, so un-womanly!"

"I protest, Mary," said Ella, with her joyless laugh. "I had completely forgotten that you were in the room!"

Then to Lady Desborough.

"Do not distress yourself, Madam; this young lady may be fully trusted, and our family secrets may almost in a sense be called hers too."

"Mother!" I repeated. Not another word could I utter, and that one almost choked me.

"Who are you? What do you mean?" said the lady.

Ella laughed again.

"Your ladyship should take the good the gods provide you, without too much questioning. You have a dutiful child, I am sure, in Mary! It is not everyone who shows so much eagerness to claim a *pre-natal* stepmother!"

I dropped Lady Desborough's hand, and drew back.

"Yes," continued Miss Delmar, "this young girl is the daughter of your first husband, Captain St. Felix, by the lady who consoled him for your desertion. Will you still claim my mother for your own, Mary? If you insist on it, we may easily come to some arrangement you know."

I turned to Lady Desborough.

"Forgive me, Madam," I said. "Miss Delmar can explain to you the error into

which I have been led, by my ignorance of my family history. Indeed, I had no intention of surprising domestic secrets in which I have no interest."

While I spoke she gazed fixedly at me.

"And this," she said, "is Captain St. Felix's daughter? I never heard of him after we parted, except a few years later, that he was dead. Child, you are like your father, you have his frank and loyal expression. My reputation—what there is of it—is in your hands, but I feel that you are to be trusted. As for you, Gabrielle—"

But I had had more than enough of the interview, and I hurriedly left the room, without further leave-taking, and locked myself into my own apartment, where I

knelt down, and thanked God, thanked Him from the fullness of an overflowing heart—for my sweet mother in Heaven.

CHAPTER VI.

AN EXPLANATION UNSOUGHT.

" Her step seemed to pity the grass it prest,
You might hear by the heaving of her breast
That the coming and going of the wind
Brought pleasure there, and left passion behind."

SHELLEY.

THE next morning was so bright and sunny, that I prevailed upon Bertie, without much difficulty to connive at my escape from prison—for such my apartments now seemed to me; and at noon, when the sun was at its warmest, I suffered her to wrap me up as voluminously as if I were meditating a trip to the Arctic regions,

and leaning on her arm, we crept down the back staircase, and through the house-keeper's room, to the sheltered, walled garden on which it opened.

I enjoyed the fresh air so much, and was so much stronger than my friends had supposed me to be in the languor of a monotonous captivity, that Bertie's anxiety was soon dispelled, and she permitted me to extend my promenade from the fruit-garden to the park beyond it, where I sat down beneath a budding horse-chestnut tree, in a warm nook, and felt really and truly free and convalescent.

"Certainly," Bertha said, as she looked at me, "Dr. Willis has made a mistake in shutting you up so long—you look so different since you came out, though indeed, you looked wonderfully better when you

first got up this morning; so perhaps, after all, the Doctor was right, and—Ah! here comes Captain Brancepeth, with a letter in his hand—is it for me, Captain Brancepeth?”

“It is for the invalid who is playing truant,” he answered, as he came up. “Mrs. Judson is wild about you, Miss St. Felix, and has laid a solemn charge on me to bring you back to your apartments without a moment’s delay.”

“There are two words to that engagement!” I answered, laughing. “I assert myself a free agent, Captain Brancepeth, and I deny your authority, or Mrs. Judson’s either. I don’t mean to go in for another half-hour—please give me that letter. Who is it from?”

“How can I tell?” he replied. “Pro-

bably it is an answer to some of those weighty packets that are so regularly despatched every fortnight from Forest Court to some place in Westmoreland."

"What do you know about them?" I cried. "What business have you to read the addresses on my letters?"

"Why," he said, still laughing, "how could I help it, when you asked me to get a frank for one not many days ago. But come, read your letter. I will take a turn with Miss Vanston in the avenue meanwhile. I brought that epistle from Lawn Cottage last night, and, I am ashamed to say—I forgot it in my pocket until just now. However it cannot be of much importance, for Miss Shelden told me it had come enclosed to her, and that she laid it

aside until she should drive over one day."

So saying he followed Bertha, who was already at some distance searching for wild hyacinths under a clump of hawthorn bushes, and I opened my letter, which was a reply to the one I had sent to Mr. Curling more than a week ago. Here it is.

"April, 1818.

"My Dear Miss St. Felix,

"On my return from Glasgow this evening I found your letter of the —th awaiting me. In reply, I regret that I can give you little information respecting your family connections on your mother's side. Captain St. Felix was unfortunate in his first marriage; and after its dissolu-



tion he married a lady who, I believe was an orphan, and without fortune, or near relatives in the colony. But I have heard your grandfather say that she was quite her husband's equal in birth and breeding—that she had virtue, beauty and youth, and the union though brief, was a happy one. She died in giving birth to you, her first child—and this is all I can tell you of her.

“ I remain,

“ Dear Miss St. Felix,

“ Your's very faithfully,

“ HENRY J. CURLING.”

“ P.S.—Your mother's maiden name, as I presume you know, was Mary Frances Clementson ?”

“ Oh, Jenny, what it is to be ignorant

and unpractical. If I had but thought of writing to Mr. Curling at once, how would those magical words, 'Your father's first marriage,' have lightened my heart of the weight of anguish which has burdened it so heavily for weeks! I should have been spared, too, that wretched secret of Ella's parentage, for I never should have remained one moment within hearing of her conversation with her mother, if I had not been kept there by the dreadful fascination of a belief that she was also *mine*. Ah, well, it is over at last. I can measure the extent of my past suffering by the exquisite sense of relief that I feel now.

I dropped the letter on my lap, and looked towards my companions. Bertha was still busy among her hyacinths, but



Captain Brancepeth, perceiving that I had done reading, left her and came back to me.

"What bright eyes!" he said, smiling, "and what delicate pink roses are blooming again! Is it all from the fresh air, Miss St. Felix—or is there some kind of healthful influence in that letter I was so fortunate as to bring you?"

I held it out to him.

"Read it," I said, impulsively.

He looked surprised, and hesitated.

"You really wish me to read it? remember," (smiling archly) "you refused me your confidence not long ago."

"But I can give it you now. Read that letter and you will understand why I could not give it you then."



He took the letter that I pressed upon him, and I watched his countenance as he read it. It was grave, but there was no surprise in it.

“Well?” he asked, as he gave it me back, “what can I understand from this simple letter of your lawyer—or banker, or guardian, is he?”

I grew scarlet. What if, after all, he had never known, or cared, about my father’s connection with Lady Desborough? What would he think of me for thus strangely obtruding on his notice, my private family affairs? However, clearly, some explanation was required, so I blurted it forth without any circumlocution.

“I have supposed—I did not know that my father was twice married. I be-

lieved myself the daughter of his *first* wife."

"My poor child!" he said, pityingly. "are you so friendless that you have not retained any trace of your earlier home relations?"

"It is not so strange," I answered, "when you remember that I came quite a little foreigner to my grandfather's care. He was not likely to speak to me of my mother, whom he had never known; and after his death, I was altogether without relations on either side."

"But how then, did you hear anything about your father's first wife?"

The question was embarrassing enough, although I ought in reason to have



expected it. I looked down, and faltered out.

“I saw some old newspapers in the South Gallery, and my attention was drawn to my father’s name in them.”

Captain Brancepeth slightly shrugged his shoulders.

“The way of young ladies, I am told; always inquisitive about things which they ought not to concern themselves in. I was too late in destroying that paper it appears.”

“Ah! then you *did* see it?”

“I did.”

“And you?—did you too believe that—that—*she* was my mother?”

“For a time I did.”

“For how long a time?”

"Until, by a comparison of dates, I ascertained that your father's first marriage was dissolved five years before your birth."

"Five years? You could have known from the first that I could not have any interest in an event that happened so long before I *could* have existed. I never looked at the date of the paper."

"Nay," he answered, smiling. "I am no good judge of a young lady's age, and I have always been warned against being too credulous of her own account of it."

"Warned?" I repeated angrily. "Yes, by such men as Sir Locksley, I suppose. Do I look so dreadfully old?"



“Perhaps,” he answered, apologetically, “it was the extreme youthfulness of Miss Vanston’s appearance, whose age and yours were said to be the same, that made it seem possible that there might be a little mistake——”

“A little mistake? Of five years? and as if I would tell such a falsehood for such an end!”

“You would tell a falsehood for *some* end then?”

“Indeed I would not, and never did.”

“But this was rather an *implied* falsehood; would you not be guilty even of that?”

“No, never!” I began, impetuously; and then, as his clear eyes dwelt steadily on mine, they seemed as it were, to fish

up from my inner consciousness that connivance at Ella's lie about Moustache and the letter, and that *implied* slander of Ella herself, which had almost faded from my memory, and over which, alas! my conscience had fallen asleep!

So I hastily changed the subject.

"You have not told me how you found out that I was not falsifying dates as regarded myself?"

"I learnt it from yourself."

"I do not understand you."

"Do you remember telling me of the incident of your escape from the 'Medea'?"

"Of my rescue by you, for which I have never thanked you."

“You may thank me,” he said, laughing, “when I thank *you* for proving to me how very unlike your deliverer was, or is, to him ‘your fancy painted;’ when I learnt from you who it was whom I had had the happiness of saving, I knew at once that Lady Desborough could not be your mother; for you were a mere baby, and the date of that paper was ten years earlier.”

I was silent, and meditated for a little while. Then I asked suddenly,

“When did you meet with that wretched print?”

“Before you came to stay at Forest Court.”

“Why did you not tear it to bits?”

"It was not mine to tear. I asked Lady Waldron for permission to take those papers, when I feared, from your occasional trips to the lumber-room, that they might meet your eye; and I destroyed them. But the mischief was done, it seems."

"One more question. Did any one beside you see them?"

"No one. I am certain of that. The mare's nest was a discovery of yours and mine only — unless, indeed, you shared it with our blind friend?"

"I did; and it was he who advised me to write to Mr. Curling, but——" and here I paused and floundered, for by telling how I had discovered my own and M. de Montreuil's error, I should

be betraying Lady Desborough's secret. Fortunately, at that crisis Bertha rejoined us.

"You have sat out quite long enough, Mary ; I shall take you in at once."

And I rose immediately, and took Captain Brancepeth's offered arm.

"Not that way, please, we came through the fruit garden, we must go back the same way," said Bertie, "for I left the key outside."

"As if the gardener would not see to that. But that is Bertie all over, Captain Brancepeth ; if she takes on herself the most trifling duty, she will fulfil it to the uttermost."

"It is only trifling duties that I have to perform," answered Bertie, simply.



"Is *any* duty trifling?" asked my companion. "If you had served on board a man-of-war, Miss St. Felix, you would know the answer to that question. Ah, see there is Lady Waldron, with Judson in the housekeeper's room."

And her Ladyship's voice was audible enough.

"I always said, Judson, that boy is no good, he may do for a stable-helper, but there is no making of a house-servant in him, an idle, dirty——Oh, Mary, and Bertie, my dears! I was getting anxious about you, you should not have been out so long. Sit down, girls, you are not disturbing me at all. Captain Brancepeth, does not Mary look blooming to-day? In another month she

will be quite recovered, and Mrs. Shelden will be trying to rob us of her."

"That reminds me," said the Captain, "that I have a message for Miss St. Felix from Miss Shelden. She desires that you and Miss Vanston prepare to leave Forest Court on Thursday morning, when she will send a post-chaise from the Raven, to bring you both back to Ashfield. She thinks the change, even though it be for the worse, will be good for the invalid."

"For the convalescent, you mean, if you please. Indeed, dear Lady Waldron, I have been a trouble to you long enough, and I shall obey Selina's orders at once."

Lady Waldron was beginning to protest



against the suddenness of the recall—the short notice, &c., when Sir Locksley came clanking noisily into the room.

“Young ladies, your most obedient. Judson, you are called for in the stable-yard. That fool of a lad, your new page, was playing with the dogs when he ought to have been cleaning the plate; and ‘Vixen’ has bit him. He is roaring like a young bull for Friar’s Balsam, or some mess. Run and bind him up and thrash him well.”

With these contradictory orders, Judson departed; and Lady Waldron called on her stepson to join her in lamenting over my resolution to leave Forest Court.

“Going on Thursday?” he said. “Won’t it do as well a day or two later? On Thursday the hounds meet at Goff’s Oak.

I was in hopes, Miss St. Felix, that you would honour us by coming to see them throw off—if you are well enough. The drive will do you good—and you have never once attended our meets.”

I declined this invitation, pleading Selina’s wish for our return. But Sir Locksley was determined to gain his point.

“You won’t care to oblige *me*, I know, Miss St. Felix, or I would say, I *particularly* wish you to attend this meet. Brancepeth, do you persuade her, there’s a good fellow.”

“Why do you wish her to be there?” asked his cousin.

“Well — the fact is, people are such d—d fools and gossips, (I beg your pardon, Miss St. Felix), they have got up such silly rumours about this unfortunate—acci-

dent of hers—and if, before she leaves Forest Court, she would show herself just once—publicly you know—they would see that she was all right again, and that we were all parting good friends—and the story would die away you see!”

“To be sure!” said Lady Waldron. “I don’t know why anyone should suppose we were *not* all good friends—still, as you say, Locksley, it might be as well if dear Mary could show herself in health and spirits before she goes back to Ashfield.”

I looked at Captain Brancepeth, and hesitated, for he did not return the glance.

“Do, Miss St Felix,” urged the Baronet. “It is the last meet of the season, and there will be a full field—and plenty of

ladies at the cover-side, too. You need not stay a moment longer than you like. Those who know you will come up to you and congratulate you ; and everybody will be glad to see you, and it will be a gay sight, and you will enjoy it after having been cooped up so long."

Ooce more I looked wistfully at Captain Brancepeth ; and this time he met my eyes with a smile.

"Would you like to go?"

"Oh yes—if Selina would not be annoyed.

"It will only make one day's difference to her," rejoined Sir Locksley. (He was quite as eager to get rid of me as I was to leave him.) "So it is settled, is it not? If it is as fine as it is to-day, you shall have Lady Waldren's pony carriage, and Miss Delmar will drive you——"



"That she certainly shall not!" I cried, with such vivacity that Lady Waldron looked surprised, Captain Brancepeth amused, and Sir Locksley disconcerted. "No!" I added, "Bertie shall drive me, please—the ponies are very quiet, and she drives the Beauchamp's pony-chaise sometimes."

"As you like," said the Baronet, "only I thought you would feel safer with Miss Delmar, as she knows how to drive."

Safe? He might as well have said I should be *safe* up a tree with a tigress, because it knew how to climb!

But I merely remarked politely,

"Miss Delmar has her horse, Sir Locksley, and Miss Delmar, *en Amazone*, will be quite a part of the show. I will go now and write a note to Selina—you will send it over to Ashfield for me?"

“I will give orders instantly to one of the grooms, to ride over with it. Shall we have the pleasure of seeing you at dinner to-day, Miss St. Felix? It is rather a field day with us, as my mother may have told you. General Hosmer and his daughter are coming for a few days, and a party of fellows from town to join the hunt, and —”

“Then, if you please, Lady Waldron, Bertie and I will dine together in my private room. I am scarcely equal to much company yet, Sir Locksley.”

“But little Gillespie is coming too, Miss St. Felix, can you be so cruel as to

disappoint both him, and Brancepeth here?"

"All the disappointment will fall on Gillespie," said Brancepeth, "for I am going up to town this afternoon for a day. I will be back early on Thursday morning, at latest; and join the meet at Goff's Oak. Perhaps Miss St. Felix will allow me to drive her and Miss Vanston back?"

"I will send old Stevens with them, at any rate," said Sir Locksley, "to see they don't come to grief through any nervousness of the fair whips. But it is a promise, Miss St. Felix, is it not? Honour bright, you know?"

It was part of me doubtless, but I *could not* suppress the taunting rejoinder.

“By all means, Sir Locksley, keep honour bright. I will not fail you.”

He turned on his heel, without reply, and left us.

CHAPTER VII.

BETRAYAL.

" You never spoke what did become you less
Than this, which to reiterate were sin
As deep as that, though true."

A WINTER'S TALE.

TENNY, this Forest Court is an
awesome dwelling! The atmosphere
in it is surcharged with an electricity of
secret vice and treachery that may burst
at any hour in tempest on our heads!
I fear—I fear—that a storm is impend-
ing now. I wish I were safe back with

Bertie, in the serene security of her innocent home. One comfort is, that Gabrielle does not return there. In a note to Bertha, Selina says that her engagements with Miss Delmar are terminated by "mutual consent," and that her boxes, and gimcracks have been forwarded to the care of a friend of the young lady's in London, to whose house she intends going when she leaves Forest Court. And leave Forest Court she must! as you will see when I have told you what has just occurred there. I only hope and pray, that she may depart in peace.

Bertha and I dined together yesterday in my own room, as we had arranged, and intended to have spent the evening quietly—I lying on the sofa combing



Moustache's long ears, while she read aloud to me Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner."

But the wild, weird story was not suited to Bertha's gentle monotone. I was waxing impatient of her style of reading, and thinking how differently Captain Brancepeth would have rendered it, when a message came from Lady Waldron, requesting Miss Vanston to join her for an hour or two in the drawing-room.

Bertha quietly laid aside her book, went into her own apartment, and returned in a few moments in the simplest, but freshest of evening dresses, with just a blue ribbon in her fair hair. If *I* had been in her place, I should have spent four times longer in prances



and twirls between the toilet-table and the cheval-glass. I went to bed before she came back, and hearing her in her own room, I called to her to come and tell me what was going on in the state apartments.

"Nothing more than usual," she answered.

Lady Waldron had sent for her to talk to Miss Hosmer, who had expressed a wish to see her. There was no other lady in the drawing-room, but Gabrielle—between whom, and the General's daughter, there existed a mute animosity.

So Bertie did her best to amuse Miss Hosmer, and Ella played draughts with Lady Waldron. None of the gentlemen appeared, except the old General, who



fell asleep in an easy chair. Then, at bed-time the butler came in with candlesticks, and informed his mistress in a kind of semi-confidence, that the gentlemen were excessively noisy, and had had a great deal of port and claret, and they were not likely to show themselves among the ladies that night. And so the neglected fair ones retired to their chambers.

"But Willie Gillespie?" I asked, "did he not join you, Bertie?"

"He came in rather late," she replied, "but he only stayed a little while, and he was very silent and pre-occupied, and scarcely spoke a word."

"I hope *he* had not taken too much of the port and claret?"



"I do not think so," answered Bertie, "I rather suspect there was something wrong among the gentlemen downstairs, for I saw Charlie Stanton, who is one of the guests, come to the door and make a sign to young Gillespie, who instantly joined him; and they did not re-appear."

"Perhaps there was quarrelling?"

"I think not," said Bertha, "for I saw Rogers (the butler) smile when he told his mistress that the gentlemen were 'very noisy.' I fancy that some of them were very tipsy and troublesome. Do you know, Mary, I think sometimes it is a pity that Willie Gillespie should come here so much. Sir Locksley, they say, has wild companions often about him, it cannot be good for such a boy."



"Use your influence to keep him away then, Bertie, I fancy this visit of his was to meet you?"

"If so," said Bertha, "it will be the last he will pay for such an object, for Selina says, she never intends me to stay again anywhere without her; and I am sure *she* will never come to such a gay house as Forest Court."

"Gay, do you call it?" I said, with a yawn, "I find it dull enough."

And I turned on my unwounded side, and fell asleep.

The next morning I was busy in folding up and putting away various items, preparatory to the final packing up of my effects, and Bertha was assist-

ing me; when a knock came at the door, and Willie Gillespie peeped in, with a pleading face.

"May I speak to you for a few moments, Mary? I have something very particular to say to you."

"Oh, certainly!" I replied gaily, "I hope you are returning to your first love, Willie, and repenting your inconstancy. Both Bertie and I will forgive you."

But when I looked up, smiling, into the youth's face, I was struck by its unusual gravity; and it evidently alarmed Bertha, for she turned pale.

"It is nothing that concerns either of you," he said, "so don't look so frightened Miss Vanston—only—I want to talk it

over to somebody, and I've got so used to talk grievances with Mary, she's so bright, you know; she takes half the gloom off things, when she looks at them."

At this hint, Bertie very quietly moved to the door, turning as she left the room to say.

"I shall go and ask Miss Hosmer to take a walk with me, Mary, so you and Mr. Gillespie can have your confidences undisturbed."

Willie looked after her as she left the room.

"How sweet she is!" he sighed, "as pure as a star, and as cold. I could not say before her what I came to say, Mary, because I am sure she knows nothing of the matter; and she ought

not to know. You are sure there is no one listening in the next room?"

"Quite sure. I have just come from there. There is no one listening. What are you going to tell me? Something about Ella?"

He nodded.

"Will it do her, or anyone else any good to tell it me? For if not, Willie, I would much rather not hear it."

"It may do her good—and at all events, I think you should know it; indeed, you know much of it already."

"Be as quick as you can, then; for I am sick of Ella, and her affairs."

"No wonder," said Willie, significantly.
"But I say, Mary, what a little brick you are — never to have peached on Ella!"

"Who *has* peached?" I asked, hastily.

"Who? Why Sir Looksley himself. Come, I'll tell you all about it; but look into the next room first, I am sure I heard some one moving. I don't want to talk for the benefit of the servant's hall."

"It is only Moustache scratching at the door—see!"

I opened the door, leaving it ajar, and the little dog walked in.

"Now Willie," and I resumed my seat, as he stood leaning his arms on the table beside me.

“Well, after the ladies left the dinner-table, yesterday, there was a good deal more drinking and loud talk than has ever been at Forest Court when I have been there before. One thing—Brancepeth was not there, and for some reason, Sir Locksley always is better behaved in his company. He—Sir Locksley I mean—was getting very uproarious, and I was just thinking I’d cut away, when I heard your name, and stopped. Some of the fellows were chaffing Sir Locksley, and telling him that everybody was saying that you had frightened him by playing the ghost, and that he had shot you; but you were so game, you wouldn’t tell, and that the least he could do, would be to marry you, and make you the mistress of Forest Court.”



“Marry *me*? that brute! as if he’d *dare*! I should like to *kill* them!”

And I cried for rage.

“Now don’t, Mary!” pleaded Willie. “I can’t go on if you begin to whimper, what does it matter what they said, they were all screwed.”

“I wish they were ‘screwed’ under a linen-press!” said I viciously, “well?”

“Well, Sir Locksley said it was a d—d shame to accuse him of having been afraid of a girl’s tricks, much less, of shooting her for them, and he was not going to put up with it any longer, he didn’t care who knew. It was that Irish vixen who shot the poor child, because she had surprised her——”

And here Willie stopped, and looked

down, blushing so, that we must have looked like "twin cherries on one stalk."

"In short," he resumed, "he told all—all that you know, and more than all that I can repeat to you."

"He is a ruffian, then, and if any of his guests had had the feelings of gentlemen, they would have told him so to his face."

"They were too tipsy to care, most of them. Still, one or two—Charlie and I, and one or two others, were so disgusted that we left the room. I went to the ladies, but Charlie came and beckoned me out to the billiard-room, where one of the fellows—young Westropp—whose mother and sisters were on

a visit here a fortnight ago—was making a dreadful row. He vowed that he would challenge Sir Locksley for having insulted them, by bringing a light woman into their society. We had a deal of work to pacify him. Charlie said, that he could not expect Waldron would be more scrupulous for his friend's mother than he was for his own; but Westropp ordered his horse, and left the house there and then, declaring that if Miss Delmar showed herself in decent company again, he would insult her and Sir Locksley both."

"What did Sir Locksley say when he heard that Mr. Westropp was gone?"

"He was too drunk to hear; he was carried up to bed—and he went off before breakfast this morning to a magistrate's

meeting at Hartingford. He left word that he should not be home till late, if at all; and that General Hosmer would take the head of the table."

"I am glad he is out of the house, as long as I must be in it; but, what will Lady Waldron say when she hears of this?"

"Just what I want to talk to you about. She will be sure to hear of it sooner or later—all the county will; but it won't be quite so bad if that girl is gone. Cannot you persuade her to leave Forest Court at once, and before Waldron returns to it?"

"I?—oh no! I dare not tell her. She would kill him, Willie!"

"Shoot him, as she did you perhaps? But you need not tell her; you can invent

some such excuse as women are ready enough with, to show her that she had better march. Tell her—oh, tell her that Charlie Stanton knew all along who the first ghost was—so he did. That may startle her into beating a retreat. But you must go, Mary, this is no longer any place for you.”

“I have fixed to go the day after tomorrow. I cannot alter that arrangement now—it is too late. Besides, I have promised to meet Captain Brancepeth at Goff’s Oak in the morning. He will expect me, and Bertie too.”

“Goff’s Oak!—oh, aye—the hounds meet there! At any rate, Mary, do something to prevent Miss Delmar from showing herself at the meet, or she will certainly be insulted. . . . I am sure there is somebody listening in the next room——”



I was just rising to go and see if his fear was groundless or not, when the door slowly opened, and Gabrielle, in her riding-habit, glided in.

Willie and I exchanged a rapid glance of consternation, for her face told at once that she had overheard all. She was white to the very lips, and her large dark eyes had a filmy glaze upon them, like the eyes of a sleep-walker, that was more frightful than any flash of fury would have been. She bent her head slightly and silently to Willie, and coming up to me, held out a riding gauntlet that she had in her hand, saying, calmly, but very low,

“Will you sew my button on, please, Mary?”

I took the glove from her without a word; but Willie said, in a tone of affected un-

constraint though, poor boy, his fingers twitched nervously as he pressed them on the table.

“Are you going to ride, Miss Delmar?”

“I ordered my horse round to the door half-an-hour ago — he must be there now.”

“Do you ride alone, Ella?” for she had never done so since her stay at Forest Court.

She turned her dull eyes on me, with an abstracted look, as if she had not understood my question; then, collecting herself with an evident effort.

“Alone? Oh, no—yes. Mr. Westropp was to have been my cavalier, but he is a defaulter, it seems. So I shall go alone!”

And taking the glove from my hand, she went out through my bedroom, as she had entered.

“Go with her, Willie,” I whispered, eagerly. “She is too excited to be trusted to ride alone.”

But Willie hesitated, naturally not much relishing the proposal.

“I have no horse,” he demurred.

“Take the groom’s horse, if he is going; if not, order one to be saddled instantly, and follow her. She is at all times reckless, and with that look in her face! Oh, go, Willie—go at once!”

So Willie obeyed—but returned in a few minutes to tell me that she had mounted before he reached the hall; that the groom had only brought her horse to the door, and that she had galloped off at such a pace,



that it was hopeless to attempt to overtake her.

I was very anxious about her for some hours, though Willie suggested that she had perhaps gone up to town, to the friends Selina had spoken of, and that she would never return to Forest Court at all.

She did return, however, at dusk, as Mrs. Judson informed me. She went up straight to her own room, declining the housekeeper's offer of refreshment, saying that she had dined already. She locked herself in, and, I suppose, went to bed, as she did not ring for lights.

As for Sir Locksley, he has not come home. One of the servants who accompanied him to Hartingford, brought back a message to his groom, to take his hunter to meet him in the morning at Goff's Oak,

which he passes, on his way to Forest Court. If Captain Brancepeth were not to be there I would not go—but I imagine there is not much probability that Ella will join the assembly.

CHAPTER VIII.

REVENGE.

"Why, 'tis a boisterous and cruel style,
A style for challengers, why she defies me.
Like Turk to Christian—woman's gentle brain
Could not drop forth such giant—rude invention."

AS YOU LIKE IT.

LAWN COTTAGE. Another break
in my journal, but this when you
read it, will not surprise you, my dear ; it
is not a very long pause either, and I am
sure I can trust my memory, to record what
has passed within the last few days, as faith-

fully as if I had written it down on the spot.

Lady Waldron's pony-carriage was ready on Thursday morning to take us to the meet. An old steady servant was sent with us ; but the ponies were quite as steady and nearly as old, or I should not have trusted myself so fearlessly to Bertie's skill as a whip.

There were several gentlemen going from the house, but having kept my own apartments so closely, I knew none of them, as both Willie and Charlie Stanton had returned to Ashfield the day before. So Bertie and I waited quietly until the last horseman had ridden off, before we prepared to follow. I had seen nothing of Ella, and Bertha was quite unconscious of anything being wrong. She was therefore naturally surprised, when,



just as we had taken our seats in the pony-carriage, I caught her arm excitedly, exclaiming,

“Good heavens! Bertie—look! they have brought round Ella’s horse!”

“Why should they not bring him round?” inquired Bertha tranquilly. “Of course Miss Delmar means to ride.”

“To ride! ah yes—perhaps she is not going to ride to Goff’s Oak, though—”

“Why not?” repeated Bertha.

“Oh, never mind. Go on Bertie. We shall be late.”

And Bertie went on without further question, not, I suppose, feeling much interest in Gabrielle’s movements, and being a little anxious about her own responsibility for my safe guidance. And even I presently forgot Gabrielle, in the

delight of feeling myself once more in recovered health and strength, basking in the free sunlight and the sweet spring air.

As we passed out of the forest glades, now gleaming with primroses and wood-anemones, and here and there, in sheltered spots, the sapphire blue of the wild hyacinth, and came out on the highway leading to Goff's Oak, the scene became more animated.

Now and then an open carriage passed us, with an old lady or gentleman escorting some daughters who, like us, were on their way to the last meet of the season, tempted by the sunny weather ; or some little boys and girls on their ponies, trotting along beside an experienced old groom ; or brilliant forms in ' pink ' on black horses and white,



brown horses and grey, enlivened the road, or flashed over the emerald marshes, coming from different points to the place of meeting. Evidently, Sir Locksley was right in his anticipations of a numerous gathering.

There were few horsewomen, however—hunting is not in vogue with ladies here. One young man, escorting two girls, took off his hat to Bertha as he rode by, and Bertie explained,

“That is Mr. Arthur Westropp and his sisters.”

“I thought of his threat of insulting Gabrielle if she showed herself in public, and shuddered ; but reassured myself with the reflection that if he had any such war-like intentions, it was not likely that he would have taken those girls with him to

witness so uncomfortable a scene. When we reached Goff's Oak, a numerous assembly of people and horses of all sorts and sizes were standing about in a green meadow, a little aside from the high road, and bordered by the slow waters of the lazy Lea.

The huntsman and his pack were there, the riders gathered round them, the carriages drawn up at a little distance. But Sir Locksley had not yet arrived, and the groom, leading his hunter, was casting anxiously expectant glances towards the Hartingford road.

I also cast anxious glances, but not in search of Sir Locksley; and I had not to cast many, for Captain Brancepeth was there in a knot of idlers on foot; and the instant he caught my eye he came



up to the carriage, which was modestly withdrawn from the general throng, and standing partly screened by a large holly-tree in the hedge.

“Late!” he cried, as he joined us. “I have been looking out for you these ten minutes. If the Master of the Hounds had been punctual, you might have missed the show; but you are quite in retreat under this great tree.”

“Oh, we can see perfectly well, thank you. I don’t wish to go among all those people.”

“We are shy, are we?” laughed the Captain. “Waldron frightened you by promising you so many congratulations? But, really, there is no one here whom you know well, and I will protect you against any too-demonstrative admirers. Ah!

there's Lieutenant Protheroe bowing to you. You see, he does not dare to approach. Waldron only wished you to show yourself—he will be quite satisfied now."

"I don't care if he is satisfied or not. I came because I promised, or——"

"Well, but are you not glad you came? Is it not a pretty scene?"

"I think it very pretty," said Bertha. "The bright green of the meadow, and the gleam of the river make such a lovely background for the scarlet jackets of the riders, and the pied coats of the horses and hounds; but I am very sorry for the poor fox, Captain Brancepeth."

"So am I," I said. "I am always sorry for the weak which is overmatched by the strong."

"Then," laughed Captain Brancepeth, "you should be sorry for Farmer Harris' goose, that Reynard marched off with last night, he tells me. But see—here comes Waldron at last."

And Sir Locksley drove rapidly up, and springing out when he reached the gate, joined the assembly in the meadow, pausing, as he returned the salutations of his friends, to exchange a few words with the huntsman.

But I did not long observe his movements; for almost at the moment I caught sight of him, my eyes were attracted in the opposite direction, by a figure which I at once recognised with terror and dismay. It was Ella, coming swiftly along the road on her fleet Irish horse, and quite alone. She came at a



pace as rapid as if the object of the chase had been in sight, and so the object of *her* chase was.

At the sound of the galloping hoofs, all eyes turned towards her, and I saw, or fancied I saw, significant glances pass between some of the men, and a slight, indefinable stir, as if of expectation.

She pulled up her horse at the gate, threw the bridle on his neck as she dismounted, and walked into the meadow, looking neither to the right nor to the left. With one hand she gathered up her long skirt, and in the other she held a dog-whip, with a leather thong at the end, which she had taken, I suppose, from Sir Locksley's armoury of such implements, and which looked unsuitable

for her delicate hand. No wonder the people gazed at her, and drew together to whisper as she passed them, for her cheek was pale as death; her white clenched teeth glittered like a wild cat's beneath her curled, contracted lip, and all the fire of her passionate nature blazed in her fierce eyes.

Waldron alone, had not observed her approach. He was on the point of mounting his hunter, when something caught his attention in the stirrup-leathers, and he bent down to examine them. As he raised himself, he was directly confronted by Gabrielle, who addressed him in a voice, not loud, but clear, and of which the practised modulation made every word distinctly audible to all who stood within a few yards distance.

“Sir Locksley Waldron,” she said, “you have defamed and insulted me—a woman—and your guest. Coward like, you have presumed on the knowledge that I have no father, no brother, to punish you. But you are not worthy to be punished as a gentleman, or even as a man. Base cur that you are, take a hound’s chastisement !”

And lifting her arm, she struck him with her whole force full in the face, with the heavy dog-whip.

I saw the blood streaming from his forehead, as he reeled, and staggered back, more, probably from the surprise than from the violence of the blow. I saw the men rush forward, and close round him; and I looked no more at that time, for Bertha had fainted away, and lay

in a heap at my feet, her head and arm hanging out of the carriage in such a position, that if the ponies had started off, she might have received fatal injury. I think, if *she* had not fainted *I* must have done so—I felt so deadly sick—but I forgot my own feelings in ministering to her.

The old groom ran to the horses' heads; Captain Brancepeth lifted her from her dangerous position, and I supported her head against my lap, while he ran to the river and dipped his handkerchief in water, to bathe her face, which he did so lavishly,—being used to splash the element about, I suppose,—that he might almost have been intending to wash the carriage, such a pool was at my feet. That is the “mission” of my

sailor friend, apparently, to *damp* poor me! But I did not swear at him *this* time, I promise you.

The first words Miss Vanston uttered were.

"Take me home. Captain Brancepeth — Mary! Oh, take me home to Selina, I am quite well—let us go at once!"

"You cannot drive," said the Captain, "and you must not be in the back seat alone. How shall we manage, Miss St. Felix?"

"Oh, never mind the look of the thing," I answered, impatiently, "who will think of us? You, and Stevens must sit in front, to drive; and Bertie and I in the back seat. Make haste, and come away, quick!"



There was no other arrangement possible. Captain Brancepeth handed Bertie out; and while he was placing her in the seat the groom had vacated, I looked round the field.

All the ladies had ridden and driven away. The carriage in which Miss Hosmer was seated, was nearly out of sight, and the Misses Westropp and their brother were cantering far along the high road homewards. The huntsman with his pack was also retiring—there would be no hunt to-day. Sir Locksley stood surrounded by a crowd of men; whether sympathisers, or scoffers I cannot say. He was stamping with rage and pain; cursing and swearing fearfully, at the top of his high sharp voice. Gabrielle stood at some little distance—quite alone; for

although a number of men were gazing at her, and whispering together, no one ventured to approach her. She seemed totally unconscious of their observation, or of anything going on around her.

The fierce excitement had died out of her face, and though it could not leave her paler than she was at first, it seemed to have left her without sensibility of any kind, in an exhaustion like that of one whom an evil spirit has quitted, "leaving him for dead."

The dim glaze had come again over her wide eyes, her attitude had a strange rigidity in it, and the hand that drooped by her side still tightly grasped the horrible whip.

all stained as I could see its lash was, with her false lover's blood.

As I looked at her standing thus, so lonely, so outcast, watched with unfriendly curiosity by men who would have caught away their daughters, their sisters, the women they loved, from the momentary contact of her dress, a profound pity melted all my heart within me.. I *could not* leave her desolate among those sneering men! She had been wronged, and she was a woman like myself.

With a sudden impulse I turned away from Captain Brancepeth and Bertie, and went up to her, regardless of the listening hush that fell on the murmuring circle, as they drew aside to make way for

me, and putting my arm round her I said,

“Poor Ella! Come away with me, dear, come with me.”

(I could not say ‘home,’ for she had no home, nor, for that matter, had I!)

At my voice, at my touch, the tension of her form relaxed, the whip dropped from her hand.

“Mary!” was all she said, in a faltering, hesitating tone, in which was more of surprise than softness.

“Come!” I repeated, “we are waiting for you.”

And she followed me in silence. I saw Captain Brancepeth take a leaf out of a note-book from his pocket, on which he wrote a few hurried words in pencil, which



he gave with a brief whispered direction to the old groom, who touched his hat and went off.

If there had been a shade of disapproval or remonstrance in his look towards us, as we advanced, I should have—not *hated* him, but—ceased to care much for his regard ; but his eyes were on Ella, not on me. He saluted her gravely, with as profound a deference as if she had been a queen, and with none of the pity, the expression of which from a man would have been so galling to her proud nature. He handed her into the carriage with the same chivalrous courtesy, while I placed myself beside her, signing to him to take his seat with Bertha ; but as I took the reins from him his eyes dwelt one half



moment on mine, and no eyes of man
ever spoke to woman, if they did not say,
“ I love you !”

CHAPTER IX.

FAREWELLS.

"Most true it is that I have looked on truth,
Askance and strangely ; but by all above
These blenches gave my heart another youth."

SHAKESPEARE.

I DROVE on silently, my foolish heart fluttering over that look, as over a treasure newly won—to be stored away for future contemplation, as a miser hides his gold. Gabrielle did not speak a word, poor girl, I fear her meditations were of a very different hue from mine! Captain Brancepeth made some conversational effort

in Bertie's direction, but only received monosyllables in reply. She had been half-terrified to death by the scene on the hunting-field, and was scared out of her few remaining wits by the dangerous proximity (as she evidently considered it) of the chief actress therein.

But my total ignorance of driving was a far greater danger; and even those much enduring ponies waxed impatient, shook their heads, and flicked their tails menacingly, as I pulled them first to one side of the road, and then the other, and all but upset the whole equipage in an open drain.

Even Ella was roused from her abstraction by this last specimen of my skill as a coach-woman, and, almost mechanically, she took the reins out of my hand. (I

fancied I felt Bertie shudder as I gave her up the whip). And the ponies acknowledged her practised hands and rattled away gaily.

Strangely enough — or perhaps not so strangely, considering my pre-occupation and general excitement—I never gave a thought to where she was taking us, until presently Captain Brancepeth bent forward, and addressed her.

“Excuse me, Miss Delmar, you have passed the turning of the road to Ashfield.”

She answered in her usual calm and cold manner, without looking round.

“I am not going to Ashfield. I am driving you back to Forest Court.”

He resumed his place without a word, but an audible, “O—h!” of dismay from

Bertie, appeared to call for some rejoinder.

"I cannot go to town in this dress," she said. "I must change it, and bid adieu to Lady Waldron. A post-chaise from Eltham is waiting at Forest Court to take me up to London."

Nothing more was said, but I fancy the feeling of my companions resembled my own, which was a kind of sullen desperation at her audacity in going back to the house of a man who had betrayed her, and whom she had just publicly horse-whipped. I confess, too, that I felt profoundly guilty in having offered her my countenance, and poor Bertie's too, in such an atrocious proceeding.

However, matters were not so bad as they seemed. She avoided the turnpike

roads, and guided us safely through by-lanes and rough farm-ways, which I knew not of, and where, had I been driving, I assuredly should have deposited the carriage in a rut, wheels uppermost.

She brought us out at last, on a lonely side road, used only by carters to carry soil, gravel, &c., to the large walled vegetable garden, from which she could easily gain the house, passing through the housekeeper's room. without going near the great avenue in the park. The road-gate was unlocked. She drove through it, and went on until she reached the door in the garden wall.

Here she pulled up, and Captain Brancepeth sprang out, and offered her his hand to help her to descend — having first ascertained that the door was unfastened.



“You know the way to the main avenue?” she said to him “You will strike into it by crossing over to yonder larch copse; and take these girls to the house by the front entrance. Mary—come to me in my room; we will speak our last words of parting there.”

And she disappeared in the garden, closing the door as she passed through.

Then Bertie broke forth.

“Oh, Captain Brancepeth! take us back to Lawn Cottage! Pray don’t let us go again to that horrid house. Oh, take us back to my aunt’s!”

“No, no,” he answered, “that must not be. What would Lady Waldron think of me, if I ran away with her charges without even a farewell? You must return to Forest Court; but you will not stay there

long. I sent off Stevens from Goff's Oak with a message to Mr. and Mrs. Beauchamp, to beg them to go over immediately to Lady Waldron. They are old friends of hers, and she ought to have some one with her at this moment. The Beauchamps will come in the Stanton's carriage, and take you two young ladies over with them to Mrs. Shelden's."

It was kind and thoughtful of him, was it not, to make this arrangement for Lady Waldron and us? Still, I was perverse enough to feel a little pang that he should be so ready to hasten our parting. However, I kept the feeling to myself, and he drove us, in silence, as before, by the route Ella had indicated to the main entrance.

The rumour of what had passed on the



hunting-field had, of course, preceded us. Mrs. Judson was anxiously looking out for Sir Locksley, who had not yet returned, and trying to preserve some appearance of order among the alarmed and excited servants. Lady Waldron was in her own room, and General Hosmer and his daughter were with her.

Captain Brancepeth asked no further questions, but delivered us girls over to the housekeeper's charge, and went off to see after the Baronet, whom he expected to meet on his way home, with the guests who had remained with him (unless thought I he has fled from Gabrielle to London, or some more distant spot.)

Mrs. Judson, a discreet and reserved woman, who is much attached to her mistress—to whom it is said she is related—

followed Bertha and me without remark to our private apartments, and then, looking compassionately at the young girl, who had sunk down upon the sofa, with an air of utter exhaustion.

“Poor dear child!” she exclaimed, “how pale she is. She is scared, and harried a’most to death. She must have some wine, and so must you, Miss Mary. Now keep quiet, and rest, till I bring you some.”

She soon returned with the refreshment, which indeed we both needed; but even before I had swallowed it, I thought of Ella.

“Has Miss Delmar come in, Mrs. Judson?”

“I have not seen her,” she said, “but there is a post-chaise come from Eltham;

and her servant has orders to take her horse up to town. I wish she had never come to the house, Miss Mary. Such a disgrace and scandal as she has brought on us. We had worry enough now and again in the former Baronet's time; but never anything like this."

"You may wish *I* had not come too, Mrs. Judson; but for that thoughtless frolic of mine, this might not have happened?"

"I don't know," she answered, doubtfully. "Sir Locksley says, I am told, a great many things he shouldn't say when he has taken too much wine, and sooner or later, when he was joked about the ghost, it would have all come out. Well, the young lady is to be blamed, of course, but there's many will say,

and *do* say, that she has served him right. It's bad enough for us women as it is, Miss Mary, but what *would* become of us all, if the men took to telling on us?"

Before I could answer this naïve inquiry, Bertha broke forth indignantly.

"Tell what? What is there to tell, Mrs. Judson; and what do you mean? I think Miss Delmar is insane; and it was very rash of you, Mary, to take her in the carriage with us. She might have torn us all to pieces."

"Horses and all, Bertha?" I laughed.

And Mrs. Judson exclaimed.

"Lord bless her innocent heart! It's a shame to talk of such things before

her." (Every one persists in regarding Miss Vanston as a child.) "But, Miss Mary, did you bring her in your carriage here? That was very good of you, after what she——"

"Hush!" I said, "here is some one coming," and Captain Brancepeth came in.

"Mrs. Judson," he said, "your master has come home in Dr. Willis's chariot. You had better go to him, he is very unruly."

And as she departed, he turned to us.

"Stevens has brought back a message from Mr. Beauchamp, to say that his wife has gone out, but that he will be here with the Stanton's travelling carriage to take you and Miss Vanston, and

your kits—before dinner-time—back to Ashfield.”

“I will go at once and see that our boxes are ready,” said Bertie; but I lingered, when she was gone.

“Is Sir Locksley hurt much?” I inquired.

He answered gravely.

“I fear he will be disfigured for life; let us hope that Miss Delmar was not aware of the violence with which she struck. His face is laid open from the forehead to the chin, and the Doctor fears for his eye.”

“But what kept him so long behind us?”

“He was raging like a madman, and they could not get him to stir for some

time. At last some one fetched a carriage for him, and took him off to Eltham, where the Doctor dressed his wound, and has brought him home. He says he must be kept quiet for a day or two, or he may be attacked with fever."

"You will help Lady Waldron to nurse him?"

"I?" he replied. "No, certainly not. I go up to town this evening, and start for Dover to-morrow, on my way to meet my mother in Paris."

"Ah, then, this is to be our final parting. We are to meet no more?"

"Would you care?" he said, looking at me earnestly.

"A little. 'No more' is a sad

word to speak, is it not? even of a friendship of a few months' date."

"It is a word," he answered, smiling, "that I hope need not be spoken yet of *our* friendship. Your home, Miss Shelden tells me, is likely to be for some months at least at Lawn Cottage; and Lawn Cottage is not likely to be blown away like a crow's nest, is it?"

So he intended to see me again. I had turned from him when he first spoke, to hide the foolish tears that were filling my eyes. I kept my head averted now, lest he should read too plainly the gladness in them. But at a sudden movement he made, I looked round, and saw Ella standing at the door.



She was in her travelling dress, and came forward when she caught my eye.

“Mary,” she said, “I have sent to ask Lady Waldron’s permission to bid her farewell; if she refuses, you will say it for me, to the only woman who has shown me a mother’s kindness since my infancy. I wish I had better requited it. Oh, do not go away, Captain Brancepeth, I would wish you to witness my last interview with the few friends—only two—who have been good to me. Though I cannot count you as a friend, you are, I am sure, too generous to be a woman’s foe.”

He hesitated a moment, then bowed silently, and walked away to the window, where he stood looking out upon the



garden, and a little withdrawn from us. I think he would have liked to quit the room, but was reluctant to leave me alone with Ella.

But just as she was about to address me Lady Waldron appeared. She came in with an air of assumed dignity that was rather at variance with her chubby little rotund figure and waddling gait. Her dear little, turned-up nose was redder than ever, and her poor, good-humoured eyes were red too. Moustache followed her with a quizzical look in his funny little face, as if he secretly ridiculed this unwonted assumption of dignified displeasure, and was of opinion that it could not be kept up. Nor was it. She made three steps forward, and began,

“Miss Delmar,” then, suddenly burst into tears. “Oh, Ella! Ella! how could you be so naughty—so cruel?”

This most unexpected address affected Gabrielle as no severity, however just, could have done. She made an impulsive movement as if to embrace the speaker, but checking herself, she hid her face in her hands, and whispered, so low I could hardly catch the words,

“Forgive me—he has deceived me, he has maddened me—and—*I loved him so!*”

Oh, Ella, poor Ella! had you but believed, as I do, that all true, all enduring love in man is reverent, in woman is pure!

Her ladyship, (dear old soul, how I

doted on her!) took the chair I drew forward for her, and wiping her eyes, resumed her habitual style of homely familiarity, which I will never again call "vulgar."

"Well, my poor girl, there's no use crying over spilt milk. I haven't the heart to scold you, poor motherless creature! As for Locksley, he deserves all he's got, though I wish *you* had not given it him. To go and tell on a girl, and in his step-mother's house too, who has always kept his home respectable—there—there—I didn't mean to be rude, my dear, but you must go, of course, though I shall be very sorry to part with you. I almost looked on you as a daughter.

"Ah, well! his poor father would have

scorned to behave in such a way, or his brother either, wild as he was. But forgive and forget, or the world would come to an end, as our little Mary here has shown you. I wouldn't—no, not for anything—have turned a girl—an orphan girl too—from my doors, when she had been three months about me, as if she were a randy, thieving servant maid ; nor if she were one itself, without saying, God help you, my poor child, and God bless you !”

And having ended this rambling exordium, during which Gabrielle had shrunk and quivered more than once, the kind-hearted old darling rose from her seat, and held out her hand to her departing guest ; but as the girl, almost timidly,

advanced to take it, she held out her arms to her, and Gabrielle sobbed on her motherly breast while I cried for company. There was *more* water for Captain Brancepeth, and salt water too!

Ella was the first to recover her self-possession. She disengaged herself from the elder lady's kindly embrace, though she still kept hold of her hand, and turning to me, she said,

"Mary, you know something of my early history. If there is anything in it that may plead some excuse for me, I entreat you to remember it, since you and I will never meet again. Captain Brancepeth, I thank you for your manly courtesy, think of me as kindly as you can."

He bowed deeply.

"The kindest thoughts are often the truest," he said.

She turned, as if to go, and Lady Waldron rose, and took her hand again.

"I will see you into the carriage, Ella; no one shall insult or annoy you in my presence."

They left the room together, and I made a movement to follow them; but Captain Brancepeth put me back as authoritatively as if he had really been my elder brother, saying firmly,

"No, Miss St. Felix, you have done enough. Your place is with Miss Vanston now, until Mr. Beauchamp comes for you."

And closing the door after him, as

if to shut me in, he ran downstairs after Lady Waldron and her departing guest.

CHAPTER X.

A LATE CONFESSION.

“ And even that falsehood, in itself a sin
Thus purifies itself, and turns to grace.”

LOVE'S LABOUR LOST.

AND so Jenny, my visit to Forest Court is over at last, and I am once more in quiet Ashfield. What a whirl my life seems to have been during the last four months, and what a hush has fallen on it now. You will ask for the “circumstantial” relation of my parting with my friends at Forest Court ;

but there is really nothing to tell. I saw no more of Lady Waldron, or Captain Brancepeth, until Mr. Beauchamp (who had arrived an hour before) sent Mrs. Judson to say that the carriage was at the door to take us home. Oh! how charmed Bertie was at this announcement.

“Her ladyship,” the housekeeper said, “was with her step-son, who was in great pain, and dreadfully ‘rampagious.’ She sent her dear love to the young ladies, and would call at Lawn Cottage some day to see them, but could not leave Sir Locksley at present.”

Then we went downstairs, and found Captain Brancepeth in the hall waiting for us. But we had scarcely exchanged five words, when we were joined by Mr.



Beauchamp, (who had been, ever since his arrival, with the impatient patient). He hurried us into the carriage, scarcely giving my sailor friend time to shake hands with us, and off we went. A rather unsatisfactory, and "impotent conclusion," to a three months' intimate companionship.

I think old gentlemen have no idea of sympathy, and some young girls have as little. Bertha appeared quite surprised that I testified no extravagant joy at finding myself once more in Lawn Cottage. And yet—now that the pang of parting—for to you, my *alter ego*, I can confess that it *was* a pang—now that it is over, I am conscious of a calm content, which is not happiness, but a pale, moonlight reflection of happiness,



at finding myself surrounded by the soothing influences of a simple, unostentatious home, where, if there is no glitter of luxury or gaiety, there is at least no secresy, no vice, or crime.

The Ashfield circle welcomed me back among them as cordially as if I had been one of them from my birth; and they had the delicacy to make no allusion whatever to the cause of my illness. Indeed, even the names of Sir Locksley, or Gabrielle Delmar, are never mentioned in my presence. Mr. Beauchamp strictly forbids any allusion to subjects of doubtful propriety in the hearing of young girls; but Lizzie wheedles everything she wants to know out of her mother, so we are well-informed as to what is going on. Captain Brancepeth left Forest

Court on the same day I did. Nothing more is known of him. It is said—but only as a vague rumour—that Gabrielle has left England, uncertain whether for Germany or France.

Sir Locksley has saved his wicked eye (I hope he will make better use of it hereafter) but his face is scarred so, that he will bear the marks of Ella's vengeance to his grave. For a wonder, both men and women unite in reprobation of his conduct, and he is so decidedly and emphatically 'cut' by them all, that Mr. Beauchamp says he will be forced to leave the neighbourhood. It will be comparatively easy for him to do this, as the Forest Court estate is not entailed, and the house itself is left to Lady Waldron for her life, unless—or until—she or her step-son marries, when



it reverts to him ; and either of them have power to sell the whole property by “ consensual arrangement,” so that the proceeds be invested in the purchase of another landed estate in England.

Still, Sir Locksley has a dogged obstinacy in his nature, that may lead him to stay and brave the censure of his neighbours ; or he may “ marry and settle,” and if he makes a good choice, much past transgression will be forgiven to a reformed Benedict. But—oh, dear—who, worth having, will take a man with a *chronique scandaleuse* branded on his profile ?

Now, do you care for Ashfield news ? Well, Aurelia Beauchamp’s marriage is to take place next month ; in good time, for if they are not sick of one another, everybody else is sick of them ! I doubt

they will not have a very gay wedding, because Charlie Stanton has received a civil appointment in Madras, and is to go there immediately; and the Stantons are a very attached family, and will feel this separation the more, because it is the first that has taken place among them.

Poor Lizzie, too, is in great dejection about it. So evident was her distress, that it touched the heart of her swain, and actually moved him to suggest to her that she should go out to India with him! But Mr. Beauchamp will not listen to this proposal, although he does not refuse to sanction their engagement for a year or two, when, if they are still in the same mind, he may return to claim her. They are both young yet, says he.

So Lizzie sighs with one side of her



mouth, and smiles with the other. She smiles that she has won her lover; she sighs that her treasure is yet insecure. M. de Montreuil says, it is a good thing for Charlie that he should be sent out into the world (all the same, it is a pity he must go to the further side of it.) He says, he has no coarseness of nature, and that his rough ways will soon be polished by contact with strangers, from whom he cannot look for the indulgent toleration of the friends who have known him from boyhood, and that he is such a good fellow at heart that he is worth polishing. So be it. Lizzie's eyes have been so keen in discerning his latent merits, that I hope she may fully profit by their development.

Willie Gillespie has left Dr. Garnet's, and gone home. Before he went, he threw



himself (metaphorically) at Bertie's feet, and vowed undying affection. Bertie laughed gently at him, and declined his love, without even flattering him with a blush! He bade me a friendly adieu, and did not flatter *me* with a blush for his inconstancy; but on the first stage of his journey homewards, he stopped to write a passionate letter to Bertie, full of reproaches of her coldness, admiration of her saintliness, and gloomy forebodings of his coming life's desolation. Bertha read the letter calmly, smiled tranquilly, and cut it up into spills to light the lamp with.

And now I am on the subject of letters, I have to disburden my mind of a secret. I don't know whether you

will think it a secret worthy of praise or blame, but here it is.

Probably you fancy, from my having ceased to allude to my meanness in suffering Captain Brancepeth to believe that it was Ella, and not I, who swore at him the first night we met, that I have forgotten it? No, my dear. It has always haunted me more or less, with a feeling of self-reproach, and I have always longed for an opportunity of undeceiving him, or rather, for courage to make such an opportunity. It was no consolation to reflect that she had been guilty of crimes, when, in this case, only a fault had been imputed to her; I felt myself all the meaner that I had received commendation for my generosity in not casting a

stone at her for her sin, while I had yet flung—or suffered to be flung at her—the little handful of gravel which was due to me for my own.

But when I heard her parting words to Captain Brancepeth, “Think of me as kindly as you can,” I resolved to clear my conscience of the stain of injustice before I left Forest Court that day.

Alas! I reckoned not on an adverse Fate. I felt so sure that I should not be allowed to leave it without a moment or two, found, or stolen, for sweeter words than those cold ones, “Goodbye, Miss St. Felix; do not overtax your strength by any imprudence.” I did not expect that he would (as we girls say) “make me an

offer." I have not forgotten the letter to his mother, in which he said there was some barrier—though what it is I know not—to that. Still, I *did* expect some expression of regret on his side at parting, which might justify such keenness of regret on mine — else — why that glance in the hunting-field?

However, no such opportunity was found, or made, and I had to bear the burthen of my remorse back with me to Ashfield, where it continued to oppress me grievously. I tried to think that the incident might have altogether escaped his recollection by this time. So it might. On the other hand, late events might have recalled it more vividly, and the kindly thoughts that poor Ella re-

quested of him, may be nipped in the bud, as he remembers, that without any provocation at all, she had displayed the coarseness of a low virago.

Then, though I am certain he would never repeat anything to her disadvantage, now that she is fallen, yet he might have spoken to others as he did to me, in the early days of his acquaintance with us, of this impropriety of hers (as he believed it) and if so, he ought to correct his mistake, and justify her. So at last, when I could bear it no longer, I—don't be shocked, Jenny—I resolved to write to him, and confess all! I can see you hold up your hands in consternation, as you sigh forth, "Oh, 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary,' when will

you leave off doing such indiscreet things?"

But really, I was not so indiscreet in this instance, as you will agree, when you read this copy of my letter, which I addressed to him at his father's place in Shropshire, and posted with my own hands. It reads rather awkwardly, I fear, for I wrote it hurriedly, and did not pause to aim at any graces of style; but I hope at least that it is sufficiently explicit.

"Dear Captain Brancepeth,

"I am very sorry that I have for a long time allowed you to do poor Ella an injustice, by blaming her for a fault of which *I* was guilty. It was *I*, and not she, who rode with you to Eltham,

the night of the ball at Forest Court ; and she never was in the habit of using such an expression as you heard from me. So, if you have told any one of it, please say that you were mistaken. You may show this note of mine, if you choose ; for it was very mean of me to deceive you so long, but you will oblige me by not sending any reply.

“Yours truly,

“MARY ST. FELIX.”

There ! there's no great harm in that, is there ? But if there is, I cannot help it now, and I feel so much lighter in my conscience since I have got rid of “the perilous stuff” that embittered my peace. Of course, Captain Brancepeth will despise

me, but, hard as his contempt is to bear, my own self-contempt was harder; and henceforth I am free from *that*, and I intend to dismiss the subject from my thoughts for ever.

If the letter reached him—which I presume it did—he obeyed my commands not to answer it, very literally; for not a line have I received in acknowledgment, though, I think, he ought to have sent a word to tell me that it had arrived safely. That would not have been a “reply,” by which I intended to say, a reference to the subject. Never mind, it is best so.

CHAPTER XI.

BERTIE'S NEW LOVER.

JENNY, prepare for an overwhelming surprise! (nay, do not prick up your pretty ears, it does not relate to *my* affairs). As usual, I “begin at the beginning,” as the children say. This morning Bertha went to Eltham, to spend a couple of days with the Hosmers. She was very reluctant to go, and Selina was

very reluctant to send her; but the old lady insisted that it was right and proper to meet all advances that might be made to her by friends who could be useful to her in the future, when she will have to earn her own living.

Selina sighed a faint disapproval of her mother's worldly reasoning, but yielded nevertheless, though not cheerfully. Bertie dislikes visiting, and does not care for the Hosmers. Indeed, her affections are very limited in their range, though they are very warm *within* that limit. Her heart is like those flowers which only open to the sunshine when it plays directly upon them; whereas mine expands to the very promise, or hope, of a dawning ray. I am sure that she really loves no one but the Sheldens

and the French Count, and perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Beauchamp.

She has a kindness for me, but certainly no great affection, and I feel for her what I feel for the angels, a reverence, an admiration, but nothing of the attraction which draws my heart towards beings less perfect, but more wholly human. I am sure, if I were a man, I should not think the girl I loved would be improved by *wings*.

Miss Hosmer (whom I hate, and she hates me) called for her in her landau, and took her away; and when I had nodded my farewells to her, I went to see Lizzie Beauchamp, (who has no angel plumage, and no sign of any,) and we held a lively conference touching sundry details of Aurelia's bridal costume; after which I



trotted back to Lawn Cottage, to be in time for Mrs. Sheldon's tea, and found Lady Waldron's carriage at the door. I asked old Stevens, who sat beside the coachman, how long they had been there, and learnt from his reply that they must have driven up a few minutes after I left the house. I wondered that Selina had not sent to fetch me back, for this was Lady Waldron's first visit to Ashfield since the *esclandre* at Forest Court, and we girls had not been permitted to accompany our elders when they called to offer their formal condolences, and thanks for the hospitality, &c.

I was delighted at the thought of seeing Lady Waldron again, and ran to throw myself into her kind old arms. She received me with her usual cordiality, and

embracing me affectionately, congratulated me on my restored health, and, she said, beauty. But, the first greetings over, a rather awkward pause followed, and Mrs. Sheldon and Selina, who were present, looked first at her ladyship, and then at one another, like people who have been interrupted in an interesting conversation, which they cannot resume, and are embarrassed by the necessity of changing the subject.

After a short silence, Lady Waldron rose to go.

"I am very glad to have seen you, Mary dear," she said, "and my son will be charmed to hear how blooming you are again. I cannot stop to chat with you this morning, but," (with a significant glance at Selina) "I shall see you before long, and I



hope we shall yet have happy days at Forest Court together, for all that's come and gone."

Miss Sheldon accompanied her to the garden gate, and they parted after a few whispered words, while I stood at the house door looking after them in surprise ; when Lady Waldron, with her foot on the carriage-step, turned her head towards me, and said.

" Mary can be trusted, Selina ; and perhaps she has some influence, you know."

Selina made no reply, but walked pensively back with me into the drawing-room, and going up to her mother whispered,

" We are to tell Mary, mamma."

" That's right," answered the old lady,

"I hate mysteries;" and addressing me. "Only think, Mary, Lady Waldron has brought a proposal of marriage from Sir Locksley to me,"—here she paused, and then added in a trumpet shout,—“for our little Bertha.”

Having made this astounding announcement, she subsided among her cushions, from which she had half-raised herself, and sat nid-nodding her head at me, with such emphasis of gesture, that the violet powder in her wrinkles flew about like snow flakes. As for me, I was literally struck speechless, and stood stock-still, stupidly staring at her with an imbecile feeling, as if my head was loose on my shoulders, and would presently begin nid-nodding like hers, and never leave off.

Selina broke silence.

"It was most unexpected," she remarked. (I should think it was). "I hardly know what to say about it. It would be a splendid match, from a worldly point of view for dear Bertie; and the opportunities she would have of doing good—"

And here she stopped short, for I was staggering about the room with shrieks of inextinguishable laughter; and for a moment or two she could only *look* her disapproval of my levity; but, when the paroxysm had passed off into sighs of exhaustion, she took up her parable once more.

"I do not think you ought to laugh at this, Mary, the subject is a very serious one for our dear Bertie."

"Why, Selina," gasped I, reverting in my excitement to my old, bad habit of "forcible phraseology," "do you imagine for one moment that Bertie would marry that rascally, rotten-hearted rake and rapparee?"

"He has sinned, and repents," answered Miss Sheldon, "he could not give a greater proof of sincerity in his desire to amend his life, than by selecting such a partner and helpmeet as Bertha; and the duty, if she accepts it, will be a blessed one for both."

"Blessed fiddlestick!" cried I, with animation; while old Mrs. Sheldon ceased her vibratory movement, and waited patiently until her turn should come to receive the translation of our dialogue in whispers. "Selina, if I did not know you

so well, I should think you hypocritical and worldly."

"I am, perhaps, yielding to a temptation to worldliness," she answered, thoughtfully, "for, of course, we could never have dreamed of such a position for Bertha. Rank, and wealth, and a luxurious home for an orphan girl who, when my dear mother is taken from us, may have to struggle and toil for the bare necessities of existence. It is a temptation, certainly, I must watch against that."

"I tell you, Miss Shelden, that Bertha will not have anything to say to Sir Locksley. She loves a very different man. Are you blind?"

"I know what you mean, Mary, I have suspected it more than once. Still, M. de

Montreuil is going away ; and Bertie knows that he has only a brother's interest in her, and that he will never marry."

"Well, you should know your cousin better than I do ; I confess that I should have felt that I was insulting her, by believing that she could transfer her affections at a moment's notice to a suitor whom she has hitherto rather disliked than otherwise."

"You do not understand," rejoined Selina. "Sir Locksley does not expect to win Bertha's heart at once, he only asks permission and opportunity to try to win it, though he thinks, and so does his mother, that if she can be brought to accept him, she will not, as his wife, be long indifferent to him."

“And you really wish this preposterous union to take place?”

“My dear Mary, I am too old to look at it from a sentimental point of view, and I see nothing preposterous in wishing Bertha to be lifted beyond the reach of poverty. She is not strong, and if her health were to give way——”

“And your trust in Providence, Miss Shelden?”

“But is not this a chance offered by Providence? Who could have foreseen, or anticipated it? May it not be designed, not only for Bertie’s temporal advantage, but for the spiritual good of Sir Locksley too? And how wide a sphere of usefulness is opened to the dear girl!”

“I expect, Selina, that in this matter,

Bertha's maidenly instincts will prove safer guides to her than your spiritual ambition would be. It is some excuse for you that you have scarcely ever been in Sir Locksley Waldron's company, and judge of him chiefly from the partial report of his step-mother."

"At least," said Selina, anxiously, "you will not try to influence her against him?"

"No. I will promise you that. I will be strictly neutral. No influence will be required, I am very sure."

Here the old lady bawled out suddenly.

"Send for Mr. Beauchamp, Selina, I must have an adviser. I will talk this affair over with Mr. Beauchamp."

"Dear mamma," whispered Selina, "had I not better consult Mr. Prior? Mr. Beauchamp is a most amiable man, and a kind friend; but he will see things in such a worldly light."

"So he should," answered the mother, briskly. "Marriage belongs to this world, child; and I want a worldly light to look at it by. *You* may consult Mr. Prior, if you like, *I* will stick by my old friend Mr. Beauchamp."

Selina took her at her word, and forthwith marched off to consult Mr. Prior; promising to call at the Vicarage on her way, and send the Vicar to her mother.

Mr. Beauchamp came over immediately, and I betook myself to my chamber, to meditate on this unlooked for proceed-

ing of Sir Locksley's, and to relieve my mind by imparting it to my Jenny.

That Bertha could be induced by any consideration to become the wife of Sir Locksley, I do not for a moment believe; and it is highly diverting to me to picture to myself those two "opposition" clerics, shaking their wise heads, and offering their sage counsels, in a matter which they cannot influence in the remotest degree, whichever way they give their votes.

I wonder how Sir Locksley himself came to think of Bertha as a bride? She is well-bred, and well-connected; but she has no fortune, and no position beyond that of a simple country gentlewoman. His ambition would certainly

not be gratified by such a marriage as that.

I fancy that he thinks he can only maintain, or recover, his place in the society of the neighbourhood, by marrying. He is excluded, for the present, from the houses where he might find a more eligible bride.

But the Sheldens are universally respected, and Bertha's youth and innocence would ensure her a kind welcome, as the Lady of Forest Court. Possibly, like many *roués*, he is really attracted by these child-like graces of hers? or he thinks to revenge himself on Gabrielle, by showing her, that nothing more was needed to supplant *her* than unblemished birth and modesty, to which, alas! she has no title.

However, she will not have that mortification to suffer, for Bertie will refuse the wretch, and he will not be likely to boast of the rejection.

After all, Jane, you see, he never really thought of *me*! No, as usual, poor Mary is neglected.

It is positively getting serious. Everyone seems pairing off with some one else, and I shall soon be the sole survivor. The last (single) woman. For I don't reckon the aged ones, like Selina, and Miss Hosmer, who have long since dree'd their doom, and passed beyond the range of matrimonial vision.

CHAPTER XII.

BOWLED OUT.

“ Not with a warmer, purer ray
The sun enamoured, woos young May,
Nor May with softer maiden grace
Turns to the sun her blushing face.”

MONTGOMERY.

I WAS very curious to hear whether the Reverends agreed, or differed in their views of the Baronet's proposal for Bertie. They differed, of course ; but I was not altogether prepared to find that the “worldly churchman” was decidedly against Sir Locksley, and the

“pious pastor” in his favour. Perhaps there was nothing surprising in this. Mr. Beauchamp, as a man of the world, knew more of Sir Locksley’s personal character than Mr. Prior could do, and could better estimate a girl’s chances of happiness as his wife ; while Mr. Prior looked only to the influence for good, that the young Lady Waldron would possess, and trusted that the “unbelieving husband would be sanctified by the wife.”

However this may be, Mr. Beauchamp made poor old Mrs. Sheldon thoroughly ashamed of herself for having ever contemplated the possibility of such a match. When I joined them at tea-time, he was still whispering vehemently into her ears, an expostulation which was audible enough

to me, and in every word of which I fully concurred.

“An excellent match, my dear Madam? Yes, I am quite aware of the social advantages such a marriage may seem to offer, but the highest social advantages may be bought too dear. When a refined, and pure-hearted woman marries a coarse-minded and unprincipled man, she either falls to his level, and loses his respect—or she maintains her own, and loses, or fails to win, his affection. In either case she is unhappy. ‘Love?’ There is no question of love here. Bertie has seen very little of Sir Locksley, and has not shown the slightest interest in him; and if this proposal had been anything but an after-thought of his, he would never have insulted her, as he has insulted all his

mother's female guests, by his disgraceful intrigue and self-exposure. No, no! our little white rose-bud will never bloom on such a breast as *that!*"

When Selina came in from her visit to Mr. Prior, Mrs. Sheldon repeated to her what Mr. Beauchamp had said, adding, with a sigh,

"I suppose he is right, my dear; though I think he is rather severe upon Sir Locksley. That horrid girl followed him all the way from Ireland, and how could he shake her off? It was as much her fault as his, I have no doubt. Oh, yes, I know, we must not speak of these things before Mary. Well, and what does Mr. Prior say?"

"Mr. Prior," answered Selina, with a

little hesitation, "is not at all disposed to think lightly of Sir Locksley's sin and disgrace, but he considers that he is taking the first step towards repentance and reformation, by choosing, as a partner for life, one so innocent and holy as dear Bertie is. As the mistress of Forest Court she would have it in her power to do so much good, and the husband might be won by the pure conversation of the wife. It seems, he thinks, quite a providential opening, quite a call, to Bertie ; but, of course, he does not advise her friends to attempt to influence her decision in the slightest degree. We shall only pray that she may be guided aright."

To which I, rather pertly I am afraid, rejoined,

"Take care, Selina, that you are not pray-



ing, that she may be guided in the direction *you* think right."

And I felt myself rebuked by her meek response.

"Yes, Mary, that is a snare into which we are too often led by our self-will."

Ah, Selina is rather narrow-minded in some things—but I hope I may be half as good as she is when I am her age!

Apparently, Miss Sheldon was of opinion that "in the multitude of counsellors is safety"—or she wished Bertha's decision to be uninfluenced by any lurking hope of a proposal from another quarter—for when I came in from my promenade the following morning, I found her in the parlour, in close conference with M. de

Montreuil, evidently on the same subject on which she had already consulted her spiritual advisers; and, obeying her glance of invitation, I joined her and the visitor, feeling, I admit, a lively curiosity to know how our blind friend received the confidence.

The Count's features wore an expression of thoughtfulness, and a slight shade of anxiety; but I could detect in him nothing of the restlessness of passionate or jealous rivalry. He was speaking when I entered, and after his accustomed friendly greeting, he went on with what he was saying.

"But let me clearly understand what you ask of me, Miss Sheldon, since you expressly disclaim any wish to use



persuasion, or dictation to Bertha in this matter?"

"I want you," answered Selina, "as a friend Bertie looks up to—whose judgment she relies upon—and who can have no personal interest whatever in her choice of a lot in life" (M. de Montreuil suppressed a sigh), "to set before her the advantages of the brilliant position that is offered her; contrasting it with the poverty and humility of that to which she may be destined, if she declines it. It is, I feel, the duty of her friends to set this clearly before her. A time *may* come, though I hope it never will, when such considerations may weigh with her, as they cannot do at present—when wealth and rank may assume a far greater importance in her eyes, than

they now have; and we should not leave it in her power to reproach us, even in thought, for having suffered her in the ignorance of youth, and worldly inexperience to reject a gift of which she did not estimate the true value."

During this oration, M. de Montreuil had sat motionless, leaning forward in an attitude of attention, but with his face bent towards the ground. He now raised it, and turned his melancholy, darkened eyes to the speaker.

"You are right," he said gravely; "before Bertha's choice is fixed, she should be taught, as far as her friends can teach her, the comparative worldly gain or loss involved in it. I presume, of course, that there is nothing in Sir Locksley Waldron's personal character

which ought to weight the scales against him?"

Selina's only reply was addressed in a rapid glance to me, which I understood as saying,

"Do not prejudice our friend against Bertie's suitor."

Evidently M. de Montreuil had heard nothing of what had passed at Forest Court—which was not singular, as he had only recently returned from a visit to his friends in town, and the only times he had called since in Ashfield, were at the Vicarage, where, the girls being present, no allusion had been made to the late scandal.

As Selina remained silent, the Count turned to me.

"Do you like Sir Locksley, Miss St. Felix?"

"I?" I began, impulsively, and was about to say, "I *hate* him!" but checked myself, and substituted for this emphatic declaration, "I don't like him, M. de Montreuil; but then, you know, he has never made love to *me*."

He smiled slightly.

"I have met him but once," he said, "when I went to visit you, Miss St. Felix; and I found him hospitable and courteous—he is young?"

"About your age."

"Handsome?"

"He is generally considered so."

"You must have had opportunities of observing him in his domestic relations; he is a good son? a kind master?"



"I suppose he is both—as men go; but how does that help you, M. de Montreuil—since Bertie will not be either his servant, or his mother?"

"Hush!" cried Selina, "here is Bertie coming up the garden walk. M. de Montreuil, I leave the affair in your hands."

She made her escape as Bertha entered the house, and I was following her upstairs, when she stopped me,

"No, Mary, you must go back into the parlour, if you please. Your presence will not be the restraint on Bertha that mine would be; and it is a fixed rule with me, never to permit a young girl to be alone with a gentleman who is not her relative—or her betrothed lover——"

“Not even with a confidential friend like M. de Montreuil?” cried I, in amazement.

“Not even with him. A rule is of little worth, if exceptions and deviations are allowed. I am very old-fashioned; and over-scrupulous, it may be; but Bertha does not rebel. She never expects, and has never desired, that I should relax this rule—even with M. de Montreuil. So go back, if you please, Mary.”

I hesitated, and lingered a little; but Selina was firm; so I complied with her wish, and re-entered the parlour, where, having exchanged a few words of greeting with Bertie, I took up my work-box, and seated myself at a respectful distance in the easy-chair which old Mrs. Sheldon

usually occupied. I only needed a wig, and a pair of spectacles, to turn me into a nice, respectable old *gouvernante* at once !

Miss Vanston seemed quite regardless of my presence. She was standing close to M. de Montreuil's chair, with one hand leaning on the back of it. In the other, she carelessly swung her hat by the strings. She had taken it off when she came in, and her golden curls nearly swept the blind man's brow, as he lifted it towards the sweet face that bent over him. She was describing, with some animation, some trivial incident of her late visit, that she thought calculated to amuse him ; but he heard her very absently, and made no effort to continue the conversation when she stopped. Already a faint cloud of

anxiety was beginning to shadow her features, when he said abruptly,

“Bertha, my child, your aunt has received a proposal of marriage for you, which she wishes you to think seriously about, before you decide on your reply.”

She looked surprised, but it was at his manner, not at the matter of which he spoke; for presently she laughed in light girlish gaiety.

“That irrepressible Willie again? As if anyone could think seriously of such absurdity!”

“It is not Willie, but a very different person. Your new lover, Bertha, is Sir Locksley Waldron.”

A pause. Bertie’s amazement was too great for speech. But she soon recovered

herself. Somehow, to the most simple-hearted of maidens, it does not seem strange, that any man should present himself to her in the character of a wooer.

So she remarked pensively.

“What could have put such a folly into his head?”

“It need not be a folly, dear; that will depend on the answer you give him.”

Bertie quietly seated herself at the table, and began to disentangle with her white teeth the knot into which she had twirled her hat-strings.

“Bertha,” said M. de Montreuil, “will you confide to me—to me, who am so profoundly interested in all that concerns your welfare—will you not confide to me,

the feeling with which you view this offer?"

Bertha glanced up at him, and her countenance changed a little.

"There is no question of feeling in the case," she said, "I have only the most utter indifference for Sir Locksley; I know very little of him, I dislike him, if anything. My lover? It is too ridiculous to speak about. Please tell him so, and never mention the subject to me again."

"Indifference may become affection on closer acquaintance, dear, since you admit you do not know him well. His preference is at least flattering, for he offers you, with his hand, social advantages which many women very highly prize!"

"So be it," answered Bertie, coldly,

“let him offer them to such women then ; they would be wasted on me.”

She rose as she spoke, and turned away, but M. de Montreuil seemed resolved to accomplish his task thoroughly.

“My child,” he said, “your friends are anxious that you should weigh the matter deliberately, and not rashly commit yourself to a decision which you may one day repent. As the wife of Sir Locksley, you will be placed above the sad necessity to which you may otherwise be exposed, of a struggle with toil or poverty. You will have all the means of enjoyment within your own reach, and, what you, I think, will value more, the power of dispensing them to others. The centre of an admiring circle ; the mistress of a refined and luxurious home, you will not



long refuse your love to the man to whose love you will owe this—and—”

But he went no further; Bertha had bounded from his side, and now stood at the other end of the room, her hand upon the door-latch, her cheek flushed with the glow of wounded feeling, her blue eyes sparkling through indignant tears; but still her silver voice was soft and low, and even the vibrations of anger were repressed by a dignified self-control.

“M. de Montreuil,” she said, “I have told you that I do not care for Sir Locksley Waldron. By what right of pretended friendship do you insult me by assuming that he, or any man, could buy my hand, without my heart? You try to terrify me

with threats of toil and poverty? There are worse evils than those; it is far worse to me to hear the friend I esteemed, whom I——” (here her voice faltered) “whom I trusted, warning me to escape from them, by what *you* call a refined life, but what *I* should think a life of the deepest degradation.”

He held out both his hands towards her.

“Come to me, my child,” he said; but Bertha did not stir.

“I am no child,” she answered, “I am a woman; and it is a woman’s heart, a woman’s conscience that you hold so lightly, that you would bid her throw it into the mire of falsehood and treachery for a titled name, and a wealthy establishment.

Your child! If you think me a child, in that word alone should be a sanctity to preserve me from such profanation !”

Still he held forth his hands.

“Bertha,” he said, plaintively, “you know I cannot follow you.”

She moved towards him when he said that ; but as it were reluctantly, step by step, and evading his clasp, she took up her former position behind his chair, but not as before, leaning over him.

He resumed.

“You wrong me, dear, you wrong me deeply, when you accuse me of holding you lightly. I have forced myself to plead your lover’s cause, because your relatives requested me to do so, and what they seemed

to think might be for your happiness, I could not—in this instance I *dared* not—trust myself to gainsay. Can you not forgive me, that I have exceeded my duty from the very fear of falling short of it? Oh, Bertha! If God had not marked me out for a lonely, joyless lot,—if I could have felt myself free to ask a bright young girl to sadden her glad, hopeful life, by linking it with the sorrow and gloom of mine,—do you think I could have spoken to her of the advantages of a worldly union with a man she did not love? do you think I would have spoken to her of *anything* but of the adoration that fills all my soul for her,—the love which has been the sunshine of my darkened life, and will be so, until the light dawns on it, that knows no darkness?”

The carnation on Bertie's cheek was no longer the flush of displeasure; the tears that dropped slowly from her down-cast eyes, were not tears of indignation.

"Now," thought I, "little Miss Prude, if you cannot bring yourself to make some advance, you lose *this* lover."

And lose him she certainly would have done, I believe, if she had remembered my presence; but I was mute as a mouse, cowering in Mrs. Sheldon's roomy arm-chair; and my companions had evidently forgotten that it was not, as usual, the deaf old lady who sat there.

And when M. de Montreuil's passion-

ate speech had died away in a yet more passionate silence, the girl once more bent over him, and passing her delicate hand over his forehead, she lightly put aside a curl of dark hair that had strayed across it.

To the blind, touch has a language, distinct as words; and the action, full of modest grace, said all to M. de Montreuil that he could have wished to know.

With a low cry of rapture, that was almost pain, he turned, and caught her to his heart.

And there I left her, stealing out of the room on tiptoe, though they would scarcely have noticed me, had I clattered away on clogs, and, tearing upstairs in the wildest jubilation, announced to Selina,

—as usual, with more force than elegance—
that Sir Locksley Waldron was “bowled
out.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BAY ROSE.

“O H, 'tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love,
that makes the world go round!”

I declare that it has set Ashfield spinning so, that the rotatory motion makes me feel quite giddy. But then, you see, *I* have no partner in the whirl who might help to steady me! The torch of Hymen is brandished over this neighbourhood in such an indiscriminate way that a general conflagration is imminent!

Even the turtle-doves in the maple bushes peer out in surprise at the ceaseless *human* cooing that goes on around them. Two and two they pace in endless procession along the river banks, or through the privet-hedged lanes of verdant Ashfield and not Ashfield alone. The marrying fever is spreading rapidly, and "spares neither age nor sex."

The youngest Miss Hosmer has been engaged in secret for some time to Captain Protheroe, and I heard yesterday that Lady Waldron is going to espouse the old General! I have laughed till I have no strength left, even for the faintest smile! *He*, I suppose, is tempted by her dower—I do not know what she is tempted by—unless it is—Miss Hosmer as a step-daughter!

Sir Locksley has gone to Sicily, (having taken Coventry on his way, and with an errand from Bertie to Jericho!) and Forest Court is to be sold. I wonder what new married couple will go there—for there will soon be a want of accommodation for all the young ménages that are setting up!

But you, Mary St. Felix! you may betake yourself to a nunnery; only take care that it is not in Ashfield, for there you would have to be Abbess and nuns all in one! Celibacy is not popular here evidently, and a poor, loverless maiden is driven away, like a sick deer by the herds—to ruminate in solitude. Well-a-day!

This, or something like this, was my soliloquy—never mind how long ago—as

I paced, lonely and pensive, the garden-paths; dismissed with a blush and a smile by Bertie, as M. de Montreuil came in. These lovers are getting tedious! I shall console myself for their neglect of me, by a lofty contempt of their sentimental frivolity.

And I marched majestically away to a summer-house in the garden, in the malicious hope that they would come there presently for the seclusion they are so fond of, and be disgusted at finding me philosophizing there, and keeping them out!

Such a sensible summer-house as it is, too, (and, so far, fitter for me and my wisdom, than for those two fools!) None of your draughty, ear-wiggy, spidery bowers, built up of lean, spindled



climbers, that keep the sunshine out, and let the rain and "rheumatics" in. But a nice, close, compact nest, made of neatly clipped yew—dry in autumn, cool in summer, but never damp or breezy, with a comfortably inclined seat, with a back and a foot-bench to it—not a green, slimy perch, too slippery to rest on—or a "rustic" conglomeration of knobs, necessitating so frequent a change of position, to avoid acute anguish, that it would seem invented rather for exercise than for repose !

I ensconced myself with great satisfaction in this pleasantly-devised hermitage, and gazed out on the river which would glittering at my feet, and listened to the soft dip of the willow-branches in the water, as it glided by; and watched the

swans preening their white plumage on the bank, and glancing at me with their cunning eyes, expectant of the biscuit with which I often regaled them.

How different this place is to-day from what it was when I first came to it, seven months ago! How lovely is the change from winter's gloom and chill to this summer glow and gladness!

And there have been changes in the little human world around me, too, quite as great; many, quite as joyous; though some—poor Ella, for instance—have passed into an antipodean season—winter when *we* have spring. I am conscious, too, of much inner change—is it all summer *there*?

Away! morbid introspection! Miss St. Felix, I will have no selfish repining that some blessings that are granted to others are denied to you. "Rejoice evermore"—You have youth, beauty and recovered health. What is that you say? your youth is orphaned—your beauty is unregarded and unprized, and nobody cares whether you are sick or well?

You ungrateful wretch! Are you orphaned like Ella—and as once you feared that you were? Is a mother in Heaven lost—as hers is, living? Or has your beauty been profaned, and trampled under foot, like hers? What would M. de Montreuil not give to be able to look in the glass, though only at his own reflection in it—an unfailing source



of enjoyment to you, you little conceited sinner, who never lack *one* admirer of yourself—in yourself. How good it is, when all is said, to feel young and strong, and able to enjoy life still; philosophy is a great consolation, doubtless—to old people of eighty; but at eighteen, I find it a meagre thing enough!

Here a nightingale in a laurel-bush near me, regardless of his traditional speciality, began his joyous, rolling trill, and was immediately rebuked.

“Hold your tongue, nightingale; what right have you to sing in the sunshine, to abash the chaffinch and willow wren? You are warbling out of time, to a spirit out of tune. Wait till dusk, bird, and M. de Montreuil will stroll out to listen to

you, *his* nightingale ever beside him; and as he sinks his voice to the lowest whispers, —for fear of startling you, forsooth!— flatter yourself that *she* will find your richest melody so soft as those! Oh, nightingale, the foolishlest little song echoed by tender memory, has more music in it than your sweetest notes poured forth to a silent heart. Such a foolish little carol was once sung to me, nightingale, in bitter-sweet hours gone by, sung, as a nurse sings to a fretful child, to call a momentary light of laughter to languid lips and eyes.”

And, no doubt to the nightingale's disgust, I lifted up my voice, and warbled,

"The dew on my flower
Is the salt wave's shower,
She blooms on the spray—of the sea—"

But I broke off abruptly, for a manly
step came hurrying along the garden-
path, and a manly voice took up the
strain.

"Than all sweetest roses
In Sharon as blowses,
My own Rose is dearer to me!"

Ah, I knew then, what hitherto I
had not acknowledged even to myself,
that for *that* step I had waited, for *that*
voice I had listened, for many a weary
day!

But, Jenny, if you think I stood in my
ivied owl's nest blushing and trembling like
a ninny, you do not know your friend. One



stified gasp, one bound of the fluttering pulse, and Mary St. Felix was her own woman again.

“False, Captain Brancepeth!” I called out—he was some yards off yet—“false in sentiment, as in grammar, to the good ship Bay-Rose.”

And I chanted, in a note which was rather quivery and Mrs. Sheldenish.

“Though sweet be the rose
In Sharon that blows,
My Bay-Rose is dearer to me!”

So far, so good, but then, I spoilt all by adding, as he took my hand,

“We meet in song, like the hero and heroine in an opera.”

And the most vivid scarlet rushed over

my face, as I suddenly recollected that the hero and heroine in an opera, *are always lovers!*

“How did you find me out, here?” I added, rather hurriedly.

“Why,” he replied, “I went to the house first, and found no one visible but M. de Montreuil and Miss Vanston, and they took such pains to explain to me where I should find you, and the path I was to follow, that I almost suspected that they wished to get rid of me. Perhaps I was interrupting a ‘duo’ between hero and heroine in an opera, eh?”

Whereat I attempted, with dignity, to withdraw my hand from his, and failed.

“This air of Ashfield,” he continued,

smiling, "blooms roses better than that at Forest Court? You are quite recovered, I see, 'all a tauto,' as we say afloat."

I have observed that Captain Brancepeth rarely uses a nautical phrase, and never, unless he is in the very highest spirits. He was seldom in high spirits at Forest Court; latterly, at least, he had looked thoughtful, anxious, and even worried. How changed he was! Blythesome and joyous, with an almost boyish gaiety dancing in his clear brown eyes, and playing archly round his expressive mouth. He was not the grave being I had known. I was not quite sure that I liked him as well in this sunshiny mood of his—at least, until I knew what caused the brightness.

"I am keeping you standing in the heat," he resumed, politely. "That is a nice shady bower of yours, is there room in it for two?"

There was room in it for six, but I thought of propriety, and Selina Shelden. However, I was not subject to her rules—and it *was* very hot in the sun. So I suffered my companion to lead me into the arbour; where I had no sooner seated myself, than he began, with a mischievous laugh,

"That was not a lady's song you were singing, Miss St. Felix. I have heard you warble a more appropriate one. In character too. Suppose you favour me with it. 'Never dimpled cheek was sweeter—?' "

I thought it right to repress such levity,
by inquiring gravely,

“Have you received my letter, Captain
Brancepeth?”

He was serious at once.

“Certainly I received it, and I am here
to answer it in person, did you expect an
answer sooner?”

“It required no answer; but I should
have been pleased to hear it reached you
safely.”

“I would not write, I wished to speak
what I had to say, and I could not leave
my parents immediately on their return
home.”

I was silent; did he take my letter as
a hint that I wanted him to come to
me?

He looked down upon me as he stood



before me, looked on me with that steady searching glance of his, beneath which the faintest shadow of untruth would vanish like a mist in the sunlight.

“Why did you write that letter, Miss St. Felix?”

The question was so unexpected that I looked down, and faltered.

“It should have explained itself. I told you—”

“What I had known from the first.”

I started to my feet in astonishment.

“You knew it? You knew that it was *I* who—”

“Who *banned* me for deranging your beautiful coiffure? Yes. I knew it.”

Something in his tone gave me courage to look up at him; and he laughed outright.

"You learnt it from Ella, then?" I said.

"No, indeed, I learnt it from yourself."

I looked incredulous; whereupon he put his hand into his breast pocket, and drew from thence—a *pill-box*! I gazed in speechless perplexity—perplexity which was fast becoming displeasure, while he slowly opened that most disagreeable casket, and produced from it—the fragment of my shell aigrette, which had been broken off from the ornament in my hair that night.

"This," said he, "I found sticking to my coat sleeve when I arrived at Forest Court. My first object was to discover to whom it belonged, which was not difficult. Only *one* lady in the room wore

West Indian shells in her hair, and that lady was *not* Miss Delmar."

"Why did you not give me back that thing before?"

"I have kept it as an amulet," he answered quietly. "A counter charm against an evil eye. But it was not a very efficient one. Will you take it now?"

I am afraid it was very childish of me, but I *did* feel provoked to think that he should have been so long observant of my evasive ways, while he still kept silence. What did he mean by his 'amulet.' An amulet in a pill-box! I was stung at that! If it had been a gold locket, or even a crystal one, I might have fancied a flavour of sentiment about it. But what romance or poetry of feeling could possibly be associated with a token in a pill-box!

I turned pettishly from him as he offered me the shells, and, apparently quite unconscious of offending, he calmly replaced them in the odious receptacle, and put it back into his breast-pocket.

"And so," he said, "you confessed at last! I tried very often to induce you to relieve your conscience, and acquit your—friend—but I was always unsuccessful. Why did you persist in your reserve?"

"Because you said that 'forcible phraseology' was unfeminine, and, you could not respect me, if you thought me *that*."

"And you considered that you had been guilty of 'forcible' language? Well, certainly, I cannot quite acquit you of it. On board of a man-of-war, for instance, some weak anathemas are not infrequent,

but I never heard one delivered with more appropriate emphasis in my life, than was the—ahem!—that you hurled at me from forth ‘the Cimmerian darkness’ of that fly.”

He was in one of his aggravating humours, and I flung from him angrily, without rejoinder. But he caught my hand, still laughing provokingly.

“Since you kept silence so long, why break it at last? Had you ceased to value my respect? or were you generously desirous of transferring the precious gift to Miss Delmar?”

“If I valued your respect too highly,” I answered, passionately, and almost crying with vexation, “I have proved that I would not retain it at the expense of my own

self-esteem, and I don't care a bit for it now."

"Oh yes, you do!" he said, still smiling, but very tenderly. "I hope you care a little for my respect;—but, oh, Mary! my soul's darling, do you care for my *love*?"

As Ethel read these last pages, the old lady leaned towards her in an attitude of eager interest. Her still brilliant eyes were fixed upon the girl; her small withered hands supported her against the table before her; a delicate flush—the ghost of a vanished bloom—flickered over her fair, faded cheek. But when the reader stopped, she clasped her hands over her face, and threw herself back in her chair, as she sobbed out,

“ Those were his words, his very words !
Oh, Vivian, my husband ! my life’s one love !
my Vivian !”

EPILOGUE.

“**Y**OU are late to-day, my dears,” said the old lady, when, on the following morning, her grand-nieces took their accustomed seats—Ethel at the table, and Maudie on the tiger-skin at her feet. “I began to fear that I had frightened you by my want of self-control yesterday ; but the reading of that letter brought everything back so vividly—it is not often that I give way like that.”

“I suppose,” said Maudie, as she settled

herself comfortably on her rug, and took the old dog into her lap. "I suppose we have got over all the exciting part of the correspondence, because of course, auntie, we know that you married Captain Brancepeth; so now we shall come to the description of the wedding?"

While she was speaking, Ethel was turning over the packet of letters, which still lay on the table beside her. She looked up at Lady Mary.

"Where are the others, auntie? I have read you all these."

"Have you, my dear?" replied auntie, with seeming simplicity, but with a merry twinkle in her eyes. "Then I am afraid your task is ended—for there are no more letters to read!"

"No more?" echoed both the girls.

“No more were returned to me by poor Jenny’s executors, if any had been in her possession; but I rather think that the correspondence languished from that date, though the friendship did not. In fact, one confidante is enough for any girl at a time, and my engagement being a short one, I had little leisure for writing ‘circumstantial’ letters about it.”

“But what became of all the people, auntie?” asked Maude. “Are they all dead and gone? Tell us the end of their story.”

“Nay, my child, we can rarely keep all our friends—much less our acquaintance—in sight, during the whole period of a long life; and I never had an opportunity of re-visiting Ashfield after my marriage. Lady Waldron did not survive her un-

seasonable union with the General, many years; and Sir Locksley died abroad unmarried. A wealthy brewer purchased Forest Court, and I believe that his descendants are there still."

"And the French Count, auntie, and Bertha?"

"M. de Montreuil took his bride with him to his estate in Touraine; but they did not live there long. He was too much attached to English habits and people, and his blindness made it more difficult for him to reconcile himself to change. So he sold his château and vineyards, and returned with his young wife to Ashfield, whence they afterwards removed to a pretty country house near Richmond, taking Mrs. and Miss Shelden with them. Bertha, I was assured by



Selina, who sometimes wrote to me, made a most devoted wife, and they were perfectly blessed in each other's affection; but she died while yet young, leaving him childless, and he pined away and followed her within the year of his widowhood."

"And did Lizzie Beauchamp marry Charlie Stanton?"

"No—poor Liz—Charlie fell a speedy victim to the climate of India, and Liz grieved sincerely for him, for a time; but she was consoled, and married a worthy man, a lawyer at Eltham, with whom she lives happily to this day—for she is still alive—surrounded by her children and grand-children. Lizzie's treasures are yet within her aged arms—they have not



been removed beyond her clasp—as mine are.”

“And Gabrielle—did you ever hear of her again?”

“For some years I heard nothing of her but that she had gone abroad, either to France or Germany. I had been married about ten or twelve years, when my husband took me for a short visit to Paris. We had introductions to some good French families, and I was paying a farewell call at one of these houses just before I left, when I found my hostess in conversation with a lady, who, on my name being announced, rose almost instantly, and quitted the room. But as she passed me, I recognized her as Gabrielle Delmar, and saw, by her glance,

that the recognition was mutual, though she gave no other sign of it.

“In answer to my inquiry, the lady of the house told me that she was the wife of an old friend of hers, the Marquis of Prouvaux, who had a considerable property in ‘la province,’—somewhere in Burgundy, I think—which he had purchased with ‘Madame’s’ fortune, whom he had married as a rich widow from the Channel Islands.

“They rarely visited Paris, my friend said, but lived on their own estate, mingling only in the society of their province, and never receiving any English to their intimacy. They had two sons, to whom they were fondly attached, and who were carefully educated under their mother’s eye.

"The Marquis, my friend added, was considerably older than his wife, but he adored her, and she always treated him with the utmost respect and attention."

"Then," said Maudie, "the horrid girl was happy after all?"

"I cannot say," answered Lady Brancepeth, doubtfully. "But I think, had it been so, she would not have declined to recognise me, and to tell me of her happiness. Brief as was my opportunity of observing her, I noticed that she looked sad and worn. Possibly, she was always haunted by the fear of meeting some countryman or countrywoman, who might betray to her husband the story of her early life; and to a spirit so proud as Ella's, the dread of such a

humiliation would be sufficient to embitter to her, every hour's enjoyment. But I never saw, or heard of her again."

"But you, auntie," resumed Maudie, "you married, and were really, as the children's story books say, 'happy ever after?'"

"'Shade and shine,' my dear, as Ethel's favourite poet sings, 'Shade and shine.' But there was no cloud on the sunshine of my day of happiness; it closed but in the night that, sooner or later, ends all days, be they bright or gloomy. Some of our friends used to pity the disappointment which it must have been, they thought, to Vivian, that he had no son to inherit the title his father bequeathed to him; but if he felt any disappoint-



ment he never expressed any ; and the cousin on whom this honour devolved, and whose son now bears it, had always been as dear to him as a younger brother. Our only daughter, he used often to say, was more to him 'than ten sons,' and it has ever been a consolation to me, that the bitter grief of losing her fell on me alone. That thought had power to soften the tears I wept for her, when I laid her in her father's grave."

There was a silence. The girls had heard from their elder relatives, how deep had been Lady Brancepeth's sorrow when she mourned her only child, taken from her in the bloom of youth and beauty. Presently, however, Maudie resumed in a lighter tone.

"You were not old, auntie, when you



were left a widow, and grandmamma says you were still admired and sought after. I wonder you did not marry again."

"How dare you say such a thing to me, Maudie?" the old lady cried, indignantly. "What woman ever marries a second time, who has given her whole heart to the husband of her youth? Could I think, as I now do, of my Vivian, as watching and waiting for our meeting hereafter, if I had been so faithless to the remembrance of him here?"

"As for that," said Maudie, "I don't see what difference it could make; for you know, Aunt Mary, the Bible says there is no marriage in Heaven."



It was very naughty of "mad Maudie" to say that, for she did so with the express intention of teasing Lady Brancepeth, whom such an allusion never failed to irritate. It had the usual effect now.

"Well, Miss," she retorted, turning angrily on her aggressor, "and if the Scripture *does* say that there is no marriage in Heaven, without explaining,—what, perhaps, no explanation could make us understand,—how the conditions of our future existence will make such a relation impossible. Does the Scripture say that there is no love in Heaven? No memory of the faith, and trust, and mutual help, and common aspiration, which are the soul of all true union here? And while these sur-

vive, where will be the loss? where the disolution?"

Maudie was about to make some playful, half-pert rejoinder, but was checked by a reproving look from her graver sister; so she amused herself for a few moments by trying to steady the unwilling dog on his stiff hind legs. Then, tired of the silence, she began again.

"What about Willie Gillespie, auntie?"

No reply.

The question was repeated, and again Ethel signed to her to be quiet, as she glanced at her aunt.

Lady Brancepeth lay back in her seat, her ivory-white hands folded together; a sweet calm on her brow, brightened, rather than shaded, by the gleam of her silver

hair ; her eyes were closed, but the faded lips moved slightly.

The girls felt — dimly, for they were young—that in rolling away the stone from her buried past, the light from beyond had transfigured the face of the angel who kept watch there, and that she communed, not with a sad memory, but with a joyful Hope, and so they gazed on her for a moment in tender reverence—then stole softly away, and left her praying.

THE END.



